

# **JUMP CUT**

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

*Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*

Issue 37

July 1992

Source: [ejumpcut.org](http://ejumpcut.org)

*Jump Cut* was founded as a print publication by John Hess, Chuck Kleinhans, and Julia Lesage in Bloomington, Indiana, and published its first issue in 1974. It was conceived as an alternative publication of media criticism—emphasizing left, feminist, and LGBTQ perspectives. It evolved into an online publication in 2001, bringing all its back issues with it.

This electronic version was created with the approval of the *Jump Cut* editors and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License.

# Table of Contents

Jump Cut, No. 37, July 1992

After Cosby/After the L.A. rebellion by the Editors  
The Cosby Show by Mike Budd and Clay Steinman  
Salvador and Noreiga by John Caldwell  
Salaam Bombay! by Jyotika Virdi  
Representations of democracy in China by Scott Nygren  
U.S. movies in China by Peter Scheckner  
Third world TV in the U.S. by Blanche S. Chang  
Come See the Paradise by Robert M. Payne  
Family Gathering by Cassandra Van Buren  
PBS and AIDS by Ron Gregg  
Truth or Dare and Paris Is Burning by Jack Waters  
NY experimental gay/lesbian film festival by Edith Becker  
Lesbian viewing and perversity by Jennifer Montgomery  
Super-8 films and the aesthetics of intimacy by Daryl Chin  
Wild Life by Gabriel Gomez  
Dorothy Arzner's trousers by Jane Gaines  
30s radical exhibition practices by Brad Chisholm  
In the Shadow of the Stars by Sara Halprin  
Mothers, madness and melodrama by Gretchen Bisplinghoff

To navigate:

Other than the table of contents the links inside a PDF are active.

Use the bookmarks to the left on a PDF file. If they don't appear click the small ribbon icon on the left edge.

Search by using ctrl-F (PC) or command-F (Mac). Clicking "Edit" on the top ribbon will bring up a menu that also has a find function (PC or Mac).

If you're on the Archive website then use the "Search inside" field at the top right.

Other options are available for different types of files.

# After Cosby / after the L.A. Rebellion: the politics of transnational culture in the post Cold War era

by the Editors

from *Jump Cut*, no. 37, July 1992, pp. 2-4, 43

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1992, 2006

---

## THE SOCIETY FOR CINEMA STUDIES RESOLUTION

1. The verdict to acquit four white Los Angeles Police Department officers contradicts powerful visual evidence — video evidence of excessive police brutality seen globally.
2. The reaction in the streets of Los Angeles and other cities is fueled by the jury's deliberate refusal to "see" this visual evidence the way that most of us — regardless of color — saw these images.
3. But how did they "see" this video? They saw it repeatedly, repeatedly — desensitized to its power and effect. They saw it in slow motion, analytically — as the defense supplied a "reading" of the appropriateness of each officer's reaction. This demonstrates how close readings can incur misreading. Our outrage is that, even with visual evidence, Blacks' experience of police brutality does not count.
4. As media educators, we must voice our outrage at this verdict and endorse all efforts to indict the LAPD officers for civil rights violations.

---

The last week of April, 1992, provided one of those historical divides that easily marks cultural patterns. *The Cosby Show* ended its successful run on television and, following the acquittal of four of the police officers who beat Rodney King, the rebellion in Los Angeles began. As media events the two moments marked a massive contradiction in U.S. life in the 1990s. As Black sidekick on a popular TV spy show in the past, as family- and kids-oriented standup comedian, as pitch man for Jell-O, and as sitcom dad, Bill Cosby represented the kind of African American male that white America could accept into their homes. And, as Michael Budd and Clay Steinman argue in their analysis of *The Cosby Show* in this issue, Cosby served unwittingly to promote some key myths of the Reagan-Bush era. According to this "new racism," race wasn't a problem anymore. Most Blacks were now middle class (or on their way), and affirmative action, entitlements, and other

social welfare programs for minorities were no longer needed. Taxes could be cut to enhance personal consumption. We would have more police and prisons to deal with those few inner city dwellers who somehow refused to go along. So went the myth, anyway.

The verdict in the LA policemen's trial and its immediate aftermath came at the same time as the Society for Cinema Studies meeting this year, which gave the several hundred media academics many chances to compare notes on and impressions of the breaking news event as well as to discuss the famous videotape footage of Rodney King being beaten by the cops. After a while a petition circulated endorsing an official resolution.

The sense of the resolution was clear, and it quickly collected signatures. The general leftward tilt of film/TV/video teachers as a group is clearly indicated by the general themes of this and the two previous SCS meetings. Topics on multiculturalism marked the convention program, plenary sessions, and many of the individual panels. [We discussed some reasons for the relatively progressive situation of many media educators in two previous JUMP CUT editorials: "Disharmonic Convergence" (no 34, 1989) and "'P.C.' Hysteria" (no. 36, 1991) — each available for \$4.00.] On closer inspection of the SCS resolution, though, there's a certain irony in having academics who have pioneered close visual analysis of texts claiming that when the defense lawyers did it, something went wrong. Of course, the main point was that the defense isolated specific blows to King to justify each one, and thus the defense subverted the meaning of the rapid flow to provide the jury with an excuse for forgetting the "excessive force" reading that comes from seeing the rapid series of blows. But one wonders if the same argument couldn't be used to question some of the excessively refined readings of films and tapes offered by SCS members themselves, especially those which purport to reveal ironies and subtleties which turn works that initially seem to function in one way into their opposite.

In the context of these events and others, such as the dissolution of Eastern Bloc communism, we thought it useful to provide a few introductory remarks to this issue which we see as continuing and extending some of our previous work, but which we also see as usefully marking some of the present ferment in radical cultural analysis. As editors we see connections and themes developing here which reflect a more general set of changes in our own field of concern.

Increasingly issues of the complexity and multiplicity of identities are coming forward in the study of media. The earlier vision of a pure high culture radical form, following the general lines of Adorno's aesthetics, as embodied in the work of the sophisticated European art films of figures such as Straub and Huillet or Duras, now seems like the last gasp of Eurocentric elitism to many. The call for a radical political content in a radical avant-garde form that inspired much of a push for a "counter-cinema" in the 1970s seldom appears in today's writing on media issues. Work on popular media forms and finding subversion in Pee Wee Herman or David Lynch seem the current direction for many. Part of this follows trends in analysis which have moved to considering how different audiences make or re-make meaning from what's provided by different texts.

But part of it is also a changed sense of political reality. Gone are the days, hopefully, when Barbara Kopple's film on Kentucky coal miners, HARLAN

COUNTY, U.S.A. [reviews in JC, no. 14 and 15, March and July, 1977; interview in JC, no. 14 — both issues available, @\$2.00] could be dismissed as reactionary because it used a realist form, as was once done by one form-crazed zealot in a presumably radical media publication. But gone too are the days when U.S. workers could be portrayed as simply heroic in their struggles or embodiments of populist virtue. Kopple's most recent film, AMERICAN DREAM, carefully reflects on the complexities of the Hormel packing strike in Minnesota and the sadly disorganized state of "organized" labor in the U.S. today.

This new political reality has also changed how we think and talk about the third world and racial issues. The time when much of the U.S. left supported any third world leader who opposed the United States, no matter how brutal and corrupt that leader was in the context of his own country, has passed. Under the pressure of world events and especially the decline of revolutionary movements in the third world and the Black liberation movement at home, we have been forced to rethink our responses. The very fluid term "multicultural" has tended to replace the more dogmatic term "third world."

### **Refining multiculturalism**

Unfortunately, so much has been put under the banner of multiculturalism that the term has become almost useless in an analytic sense, though it is obviously useful for rallying diverse people with somewhat different agendas against rightwing attacks, and polemically helpful in exposing the elitist agenda of the right. We find it worthwhile to distinguish at least two uses of the concept of multiculturalism. Intellectuals and activists frequently invoke the term to signal a call for diversity. It has a positive function in calling for an expansion of the canon of works considered in cultural production, for pushing the boundaries outward to encompass what has remained marginal. And yet the weakness of this simple affirmation of diversity becomes obvious when it is not joined with an active critique of Eurocentrism, patriarchal domination, and capitalist economics and social domination. When multiculturalism itself cannot account for the presence of multiple factors in cultural production and consumption, too often it falls into a strict identity politics, which offer a narrow agenda for action and a homogenized nationalism (be that of the post colonial nation or the queer nation) or self-referential separatism.

But in general in the present flux of radical cultural studies, it's possible to see an essentially (if we can fall into a teeny bit of essentialism) productive ferment. That there is no dominant theory, no leading figure, nor clear-cut direction should not detract from seeing a productive contention in progress. Even in the search for appropriate terms this activity has produced an abundance of suggestive ideas. Multiculturalism, cross-culturalism, comparative culturalism, transnationalism, postcolonialism, syncretism, and so forth have all come forward, as have a string of other terms: dialogism, polyvocal, polyglot, creole, diaspora, subaltern, marginal, peripheral, border culture, migration, nomads, assimilation/ dissimulation. These terms and others reflect a new awareness of the need to advance discussion with a fine-tuned attention to differences and the complexity of identity. At times it seems that successfully negotiating culture in the mainstream means not simply becoming a celebrity, as Warhol recognized, but constantly reinventing fresh new versions of celebrity pitched at an all-consuming media, as Madonna has accomplished.

## New theories

Against the traditional leftist concern with organizing direct political opposition to the state and concentrating on the mobilization of the industrial proletariat into trade unions and worker's parties, it is much more broadly accepted now that culture, especially as embodied in the media, and everyday life are crucial areas for political analysis and action. Furthermore, much of the radical theoretical analysis of culture that has developed in the past twenty-five years or so has broken with dogmatism and rigid pattern thinking in some very healthy and constructive ways. Jacques Derrida's Big Idea, that analysis must consist of endless deconstruction so as not to fall into rigidity is doubtless correct, although many who find this a profound insight seem to be ignorant that Lenin said the same thing in his writings on dialectics. Also, Michel Foucault's argument that power is not simply concentrated in formal political institutions, but is vastly diffused throughout the organization of society, particularly by means of culture, has been a powerful tool for leftists and feminists to investigate the operation of ideology and power in the microlevels of society including the formations of sexuality and gender. (And is doubtless a great revelation to people who never studied social history, anthropology, or sociology.)

However, complex cultural analysis from a radical perspective drawn from Foucault and Derrida has also proven to have its pitfalls. If power is increasingly dispersed in society and simulated in a variety of forms and micro-institutions, it is difficult to recognize. If it proliferates through multiplication, seeking continuous decentering, dispersal and a kind of infinite regression, this turns out to be the perfect justification for the existence of intellectuals. Only they can really "find" this dispersed power, and "recognize" its diffuse structure. One might think then that society doesn't really have anyone who is powerful and that those in positions of authority are prisoners of their position. Organizing for any specific political goal becomes a delusion or an unwitting reproduction of the same old power structures. Indeed, Foucault himself advised against organizing a gay liberation movement for these reasons until late in his life when he conceded that the organizing had been effective.

Others following Foucault's reasoning into the postmodern scene claim that there are no more meta-narratives or grand schemes that explain things. To the extent that this dismisses a kind of Marxism that was rigid and inflexible, open to learning nothing new from experience or other perspectives, we can agree. Any system of thought that turns into a set of formulae is already dead. But this can also lead to another happy delusion — that attempting to reason about the nature of power and to challenge it is impossible. Of course this intellectual delusion itself is a "meta-narrative," one especially comforting to those who don't want to get involved in the messy business of activism.

### A strategy for left cultural analysis

Given what has happened globally, and given what we've learned locally in working on JUMP CUT, we can affirm some strategic perspectives for the present and near future in terms of our own project. We hold these not as tenets of a rigid dogma against which to judge everything we come into contact with, but as some guiding ideas gained from experience and thoughtful reflection. Any working out of these principles must be contingent, provisional, and open to revision. [We would also

like to refer our readers to the editorial writings in the first thirteen issues of JUMP CUT (1974-75) in which we developed much of our own thinking about cultural analysis.]

First of all, we think it is important to maintain an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist analysis. The collapse of communist parties shows in full, final form the problems with those parties' theory and practice, but it hardly eliminates class exploitation at home and abroad. In its transnational phase capitalism takes different forms but the issues of exploitation and repression do not magically go away, though they certainly end up transformed.

The comparison between the success of Cosby and the brutal beating of Rodney King show the transformation clearly. Official violence against African Americans goes back to the very birth of our nation as does their rebellion against it. But now African American individuals also participate in the highest reaches of the our society's mainstream.

Second, we must constantly make the relation of class, gender, and race a priority in both analysis and cultural production. By saying this we do not wish to invoke an all-purpose mantra but to affirm these as absolutely central categories for cultural analysis and practice. Other factors may be present or important, for example, age and generation or region and locality. However, to proceed with an analysis based on only one or two of these three main terms can only get so far. Now, our energy must be applied to a more thorough consideration of the interrelation of these factors and a significant number of the articles in this issue of JUMP CUT do just that.

Third, we need to develop institutional analysis along with textual analysis. For too long the study of media and political cultural activism has proceeded with a separation between aesthetic analysis and sociological analysis. Concern for form and style have been divorced from institutional and economic study. There's a rigid policing of disciplinary boundaries in U.S. higher education to ensure that those who haven't accepted the dominant orthodoxies of methodology, protocol, and pertinence as part of their training will do so in order to get financial and prestige rewards from the system. In a curious admission of this concern, several SCS leaders at the meeting mentioned above expressed the fear that printing reports from the various minority caucuses (e.g., people of color, gays and lesbians) in the society's journal might "piss people off."

Fourth, we need to keep track of rapidly accelerating global changes in order to keep our analysis close to that changing world. This changing world challenges us to develop an analysis which is flexible and itself open to change, an analysis which can account for change without dissolving into a belief in fluidity which has absolutely no reference points, no goals, and no ability to strategize opposition to injustice and inhumanity. Such a way of proceeding calls for understanding the varied intersections of different issues and the complexity of specific cases without giving up the clarity achieved by thinking globally, daring to use the tools of reason, and making priorities.

One scene for meeting such challenges is in the creation of alternative cultural practices. To say this does not forfeit forever the possibility of changing the dominant institutions or the importance of operating within them, as we usually

must, in such a way as to challenge them. Such activities are not negligible and at certain moments can coalesce into a distinct movement for structural change. Thus, understanding dominant media practices and institutions must remain an ongoing area for concern.

But to be realistic, we have a far greater ability to develop alternative cultural and political institutions in which we can develop ideas and practices which may now be seen as utopian, but which can help create the basis for and point the way to significant change. The post WWII Civil Rights Movement as well as the more recent feminist and gay and lesbians movements have all significantly changed the world in which we live and a vibrant alternative culture has always been an important part of such movements. In Moscow, East Berlin, and Tienanmen Square people sang "We Shall Overcome."

We have loosely grouped the articles in this issue together by theme: international issues, gay and lesbian media, and mainstream genres and forms. Yet there are many theoretical and social crosscurrents tying them together which illustrate our authors' adeptness at the kind of cultural analysis which we proposed above. We would like to point out some of these interconnections for your consideration and to enhance your reading of each piece.

Clay Steinman and Mike Budd offer an analysis of THE COSBY SHOW in terms of ambiguities and complexities of audience response and the type of narrative which can achieve mainstream commercial success, one which embodies the media's racism and class bias. Jyotika Virdi makes a very similar argument about the commercial success of the independent feature film about India's street children, SALAAM BOMBAY! as does Ron Gregg about PBS' first treatment of AIDS in the first installment of *The AIDS Quarterly* series, AIDS: CHAPTER ONE. All of these authors respect viewers' desires to see certain issues treated and certain subcultures represented, but offer an analysis of the mechanisms and processes of narrative homogenization imposed by mainstream media distribution venues in the United States. They discuss network pressures but also the process of self-censorship and self-restriction enacted by the producers and directors of each work.

John Caldwell analyzes how Hollywood movies are shown on television. The networks directly manipulate these movies' subject matter and formal construction so as to fit them into its "flow." They do this through editing, the juxtaposition of movie and news images, and using new visual TV-techniques to frame the dominant ideology. In this instance, when a Los Angeles TV station showed the film SALVADOR the week Noriega came to trial in the United States, all images from Latin America, including that of Daniel Ortega, flowed together in such a way as to nullify the most obvious particular meanings of SALVADOR and Noriega's capture and trial.

In contrast, Tony Williams provides a resource guide to video sales and rentals that indicates how large a selection of media from around the world, both mainstream and independently produced, is available in the United States. For teachers, both Caldwell and Williams provide key insights on the institutional mechanisms whereby video "movies" are brought to us and our students, and the forms by which we obtain and see them, all of which shape in fact what "the movie" means. In addition Blanche Chang reviews Claus Mueller's book on the increasing

appearance of third world TV programming in the North (so far in Europe more than in the United States). Nonetheless, here is another source of televisual material both for analysis and for reuse.

In a complementary way to Caldwell, Scott Nygren analyzes the complexity of the west's representations of China's "democracy" as well as two contemporary Chinese fictional films that indicate how some of these complexities are being worked out by Chinese media makers. In a more personal vein, Peter Scheckner, who was teaching in China during the repression of the students in Tienanmen Square, had brought a number of Hollywood films on videotape with him and discusses his students' reactions, often unexpected, to U. S. cinema and their presuppositions about U.S. life.

In contrast to the kind of misrepresentation of child labor in India which Jyotika Virda found in *SALAAM BOMBAY!* this misrepresentation is enhanced by the film's reliance on realism and pathos as substitutes for class and colonial analysis, Robert Payne discusses the outright lie in the Hollywood's *COME SEE THE PARADISE*, a feature fiction film about the WW2 Japanese American internment. In a key scene in the film, Alan Parker has his imprisoned family announce in the internment camp dining hall that the Supreme Court declared the camps unconstitutional; this then in the film is the reason the family is let free. In historical fact, the Supreme Court decided precisely the opposite in 1944, and thereby provided one of the main arguments used by the German defense attorneys at the Nuremberg trials: the German concentration camps had precedent under U.S. law.

Dealing with the same subject matter, director Lise Yasui used a different form, the personal documentary, and a different focus, a grandfather who never recovered from the effects of his internment. Cassandra Van Buren analyzes Yasui and Ann Tegnell's *FAMILY GATHERING* to locate it within the tradition of the feminist documentary, which analyzes both the construction of the woman's subjectivity as well as her history and social situation.

With different subject matter, but also tackling some of the issues of "locatedness," John Goss' documentary *WILD LIFE* shows two gay Latino adolescents as they wish to present themselves to the filmmaker. Gabriel Gomez analyzes the ways in which this is a "responsible" documentary style, and also the difficulties of making media documenting underage gay youth. In a sense, *WILD LIFE* is also an antidote to the kind of representation of street youth that Virdi criticized in *SALAAM BOMBAY!* That is, like *FAMILY GATHERING*, *WILD LIFE* still uses a somewhat realist style but struggles to find ways to incorporate self-representation of its participants and the location of its maker as well. In a similar vein, Sara Halprin writes about the origins of a documentary about opera chorus singers in some 8mm film footage shot by co-director Allie Light's first husband secretly onstage in 1958 while he was a chorister himself. Halprin locates herself as a critic as someone who was involved with the directors during the making of the film, and her essay incorporates notes from the directors' film journals.

In a more critical vein, independent filmmaker and writer, Jack Waters analyzes the intersection of gay and race issues in the documentaries, *PARIS IS BURNING* and *TRUTH OR DARE*. Here, he faults these works for lacking that which *FAMILY GATHERING* exhibited, a located, responsible positioning of the filmmaker for her

own subjective involvement. He also continues the kind of critique offered elsewhere about works using realism and pathos as a substitute for analyzing the complexities of race, gender, and class positions — both that of the films' subjects and that of the makers. Ron Gregg also takes up the issue of documentary style in his observations about PBS' showing the realist documentary, **ABSOLUTELY POSITIVE**, but refusing to show the more racially controversial and more formally experimental, **TONGUES UNTIED**.

Edith Becker, Jennifer Montgomery and Daryl Chin assess the importance of gay and lesbian festivals, especially in highlighting experimental work. Chin also indicates the importance of low-budget formats for counter-cultural media work. In that vein, there is a tie between the discussion of these works, the documentaries discussed above, and all the works available on video discussed by Tony Williams. Due to video rental and sales we have a vastly different situation now in terms of access to independently produced media. This produces a kind of access unparalleled in the past and an ability to do a close analysis previously restricted to a few.

Brad Chisholm gives a view of how radical distribution was achieved in the past. His article on Film and Photo league exhibition strategies can be compared with the exhibition strategies of having women's, Black, Latino, Asian, and gay and lesbian film and video festivals, and how these festivals themselves have become yearly events in some areas and have become more focused and more specialized, as in the case of the New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival. In the original women's film festivals in the 70s and even in the 80s, many works were shown that just disappeared in the makers' closets after that. Now, more and more works remain in distribution through video, and the crucial work of progressive video distributors advances the kind of radical critical and cultural agenda that we described above. It is essential that progressive media people expand their repertoire and use the resources outlined by Williams to write about, teach, rent, and program the many artistic works that in fact have already explored new ways to deal with the cultural complexities we outlined at the beginning of this discussion.

Approaching mainstream film and television, Jane Gaines reassesses Dorothy Arzner's importance for feminist criticism, draws on a hypothetical postulate about Arzner and Joan Crawford, and begins a long-needed critical analysis of the role of the gay costumer in Hollywood:

"Whenever they could, they worked in a vein that thwarted the tendency of costume to become naturalized as clothes and the tendency of gender to become naturalized as a sexualized body."

Gretchen Bisplinghoff examines the Hollywood melodrama in terms of how it deals with mental illness in women characters. She finds that Freud's notions of the proper male and female roles play an important part here. Women must "accept their proper position in life as determined by their sexual identity." Their failure or refusal to do so quickly brings a "diagnosis of abnormality."

# White racism and *The Cosby Show*

by Mike Budd and Clay Steinman

from *Jump Cut*, no. 37, July 1992, pp. 5-12

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1992, 2006

For seven years, THE COSBY SHOW easily won its time slot on U.S. television.<sup>[1]</sup> [[open notes in new window](#)] It was the most-watched program in the country for four years running, 1985-86 through 1988-89, dropping to second place in 1989-90. Indeed, when THE COSBY SHOW led the ratings there were nights when more than half the homes watching television in the United States were in its audience. But in October 1990, COSBY began to falter, even as the NBC network was paying the show's producers a license fee of more than \$2.5 million a week. COSBY was faced with the return of its repressed, THE SIMPSONS, a sitcom cartoon about a working-class family with a nasty-comic ingredient COSBY would never include.

In its first night of direct competition, THE SIMPSONS nailed COSBY to a tie with 29 percent of all the viewers in the United States. It was a triumph indeed, since its network — Fox — was available only to 90 percent of those with access to NBC and COSBY. With THE SIMPSONS continuing to peel off children and younger males, COSBY dropped to fifth in the ratings for 1990-91. Its slide continued in 1991-92, while weekly payments from NBC fell to \$2 million. Although the show remained profitable, Bill Cosby, its star and guiding force, decided to stop production, preferring to appear in 1992-93 in a syndicated version of YOU BET YOUR LIFE, the old Groucho Marx show. Still, COSBY will likely survive in repeats on television for at least another decade. By then, the show will have attracted two billion dollars or more in commercial support.

Profitable as it has been for broadcasters and for Cosby and his partners, the show may prove to be one of the last great mass-audience entertainers. As the commercial networks lose more viewers to cable, videocassettes, and video games, they pitch increasingly specialized demographics. THE SIMPSONS, for example, has a younger audience, more desirable per capita to advertisers, which it attracts with an edge that the ratings suggest alienates people on the far side of middle age. THE COSBY SHOW seeks to alienate no one. "I want to put a show on the air that people feel good about," Cosby says (Gold 45).

Still, considering that nearly all its performers are African American and that racism<sup>[2]</sup> still befouls life in the United States, the mission of THE COSBY SHOW was difficult and its financial success remarkable. It had to represent race in a way that enabled audience members to feel good enough about themselves, sometimes for different and contradictory reasons, that they reliably returned every week,

ready to attend to the ads of the corporations that paid hundreds of thousands of dollars a minute for access. By the time the show finished its first season on NBC in 1985, it deftly had won admission into millions of segregated European American homes.

Cosby's popularity and skill was surely crucial to its success, but significant too was a critical aspect of his persona—he never raged or despaired. No doubt for many the show's goodwill carried with it some acceptance for African Americans, a GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER? for the Reagan years. Yet as several critics have noted, the price paid by the makers of THE COSBY SHOW for its jumbo audience was clear: silence on racism. "To have confronted the audience" about racism "would have been commercial suicide," says Justin Lewis, who has studied viewer responses to the program (164). An active supporter of progressive politics, Cosby acknowledges that COSSY did not mention racism for fear of alienating white viewers (Graham). "I agree with critics who say it doesn't do enough," he says. "But the people who're viewing it are having a ball with it" (Christon 45). Yet in what seems both cause and effect of cultural productions such as THE COSBY SHOW, polls show that most U.S. whites "no longer feel blacks are discriminated against in the schools, the job market and the courts" (Brownstein M1).

Four decades and more of struggle for civil rights have accomplished a tenuous change in public manners: Explicitly racist remarks are generally unacceptable socially. Yet the waning of blatant racism has in turn contributed to the absence in the media of evidence of continuing prejudice — privately articulated racism and the institutionalized oppression African Americans live with every day. Rarely acknowledged as integral to the social order, racism surfaces mostly as an object lesson from the past, or as exceptional disorder such as the blatant system of white supremacy in South Africa.[3] With so many in the audience evidently hostile to public racism and yet unsympathetic to critiques of more subtle and pervasive discrimination, it makes good business sense to discourage mention of contemporary racism, pro or con. This became clear in 1990 when CBS suspended commentator Andy Rooney from his job on 60 MINUTES after Rooney was accused of making racist comments off the air, comments he denied.[4] Such actions declare racism intolerable, even as racism threatens to return to the legitimacy of everyday conversation following the political reaction of the 1980s. For now, this absence enables whites to treat claims of discrimination by blacks as the special pleading of the undeserving. In defense of bigotry, European Americans can become empiricist to the bone.

As co-creator and executive producer of the show, Cosby insisted that it never highlight racial conflict. He says if it had done so even once, every white viewer would have felt "this was set up to make you feel like you're the villain" (Graham). The success of THE COSBY SHOW with mass audiences of whites in the United States (and South Africa!) seems to have been dependent upon its refusal to include racism among its representations. Accordingly, to whatever extent the program constituted a gain in the control at least one African American had over black images on television, it remained bound by the racism its backers feared in its potential audience and by a commercial system governed by such fears.

Yet even in reruns, there is a formidable argument that THE COSBY SHOW does deal with racism in vital ways. Michael Real, John D. H. Downing, and others

contend that the show recodes race and, says Downing, "may operate as a reinstatement of black dignity and culture in a racist society where television culture has generally failed to communicate these realities, and has often flatly negated them" (67). For example, the "class position of the Huxtable family is likely to convey a positive message about black dignity" (68) — especially since the level of consumption and occupation represented on the show would easily put the Huxtable family income in the nation's top 1 percent. Many African American viewers seem to enjoy the show because, like members of any group, they take pleasure in seeing favorable representations of themselves on television (Gates 1; Jackson 96). While the show's compromises hardly please everyone, for large numbers of both blacks and whites, then, COSBY's image of painless racial harmony seems to have utopian appeal (Gray, "American Dream," 383).

For many white viewers, however, this "positive message" may fortify racism at least as much as it dilutes it. As economic conditions worsen for most blacks in the United States even more than for most whites, more prosperous Americans no doubt find it comforting to imagine the Huxtables as viable role-models for the poor. Who wants responsibility for others' suffering? More than a few of our Anglo students and coworkers have told us they consider the show vital to U.S. politics because it provides constructive role models for blacks. For them, THE COSBY SHOW seems to confirm the belief that racial inequality in the United States remains a function of the inadequate aspirations of its victims.[5]

More surely, the prevalence of the role-model discourse is a measure of THE COSBY SHOW's power as mystification: Cosby and his costar, Phylicia Rashad, are models of success in show business comedy, not, as are their characters, in medicine or law. Thinking otherwise misses the show's status as representation. The evident popularity of this discourse about the show—that the details of its fiction are *evidence* about the world—is symptomatic of its success as a realist text, one that ruthlessly disallows the presence of any references or forms that might break audience identification with its idealized world (Budd and Steinman). As Henry Louis Gates Jr. says,

"There is very little connection between the social status of black Americans and the fabricated images of black people that Americans consume each day" (1).

Yet European Americans seem all too willing to take THE COSBY SHOW and its wealthy characters as one sign among many that racism has declined. A March 1988 NEWSWEEK poll found 80 percent of whites seeing no need for affirmative action policies to redress racial discrimination, and in May 1991 the magazine found only 35 percent believing that Congress should do anything new at all to help blacks. Perhaps that is why, as Gates says, critics of the show fear that "it suggests that blacks are solely responsible for their social conditions, with no acknowledgment of the severely constricted life opportunities that most black people face." [6] Referring to the "minuscule integration of blacks into the upper middle class," Gates concludes that at this time "blacks are doing much better on TV than they are in real life" (40). This is of course true of nearly all groups represented on commercial television. The more affluent the fictional space of the show, the better showroom it makes for the ads.

Yet given the public stakes, such plush spaces seem especially pernicious to the

extent that they feature those with least access to them off the screen. As Herman Gray puts it, on television,

"persistent struggles against domination are displaced and translated into celebrations of black middle class visibility and achievement" ("American Dream" 378).

No wonder the show has made so many white TV viewers feel so good.

This feeling makes up a key element of one of what Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott have called "reading formations." These are varying

"grids of intelligibility through which different groups of readers read and interpret a text" (60).

Viewers embittered by white racism will tend to see the show differently than those who imagine racism as unimportant or in decline. Black and white and other viewers cheered by what they see as COSBY's favorable representation of African Americans will tend to have one range of responses. Most white voters in Louisiana will tend to have another — in the early 1990s they supported David Duke, a former Nazi and Ku Klux Klan leader, for governor and U.S. senator. Gender positions might well structure response; some research suggests that white women may tend to be less disposed to racist actions and thoughts than white men ("Sex and Racism"). Class and personal experience also could influence how the show is seen. Individual viewers will oscillate between and through reading formations during an episode.

Gates is right when he says that THE COSBY SHOW has been

"remarkably successful at introducing most Americans to traditional black cultural values, customs and norms."

Yet, as Gates says, the program's popularity might have something to do with the perception that its characters "have finally become, in most respects, just like white people" (40; also see Gray, "Black Male," 238). Lewis's findings indicate that many whites claim to "forget" that the COSBY performers are black when they watch the show (173). "They're upper middle-class, not black," said one (177). Lewis found that African-American viewers find whites' denial of the show's ethnicity "faintly ludicrous," in part because they see its marks of black culture vividly (194-195). Significantly, whites who claim "colorblind" viewings tend also not to see any need for affirmative action, which whites who value the show's African American ethnicity tend to support. Reading formations contain such contradictions as celebration versus denial of difference, are often constituted by them.

Intersecting race, discourses of parenting, education, and family also organize reading formations for THE COSBY SHOW. Reportedly, an early plan called for Cosby to play a postal worker, a more typical role for a middle-aged black man in Reagan's United States. But by making both fictional parents professionals and the family distinctively upper middle-class, Cosby and his collaborators have brought into play a whole set of concerns and anxieties of the real upper-middle class, that most desirable of target audiences. (While most of the audience for COSBY remains middle- and working-class, the show favors more affluent professionals in its

themes and appeals.) Committed to stressful, time- and energy-consuming careers yet also often to their children, such affluent parents are frequently anxious and unsure about their parenting skills. At least as commercial media and self-help books tend to represent the situation, what counts is not just the time parents spend with their kids, or its quality, but the problem of discipline and authority. Committed to modern, flexible, non-authoritarian parenting, they are often vaguely unhappy with its results. Too often their children seem disrespectful, uncaring, spoiled.

Such problems result from longterm historical changes in the family. For decades, social critics have maintained that other institutions, including schools, service agencies, and especially commercial culture itself, have taken over many socializing functions previously performed by parents. Especially in the more educated and affluent classes, a relatively egalitarian family has emerged, bolstered by progressive valuation of the individuality and creativity of each child. While these particular idealizations of individuality emerge historically in market society, they can foster rebellion as well as self-absorption. Such values become adjuncts to the economy, however, when assimilated into a pervasive consumer culture, where individuality and creativity are more and more expressed only in conformist terms, through the production and consumption of commodities. In particular, paternal authority, the traditional center of the family, suffers when children and teenagers respond more to peer groups, advertising, and the media than to adults at home.

Into this situation drops Dr. Heathcliff Huxtable, the perfect TV dad. He's perfect because he shows parents how to have a touch that is firm but light, how to discipline with humor, as he disguises parental control, even manipulation, with silly faces and childlike actions. There is an inescapable element of education for parents and children, of therapy for dysfunctional families, in *THE COSBY SHOW*. Much more than any other program, it deploys and activates educational discourses as guides that connect with distinctively middle and upper-middle class reading formations. Proud of his education, Cosby listed himself as William H. Cosby, Jr., Ed.D. in the credits. He discusses the value of education extensively in interviews, and the program is filled with such references (Taylor 160-164). Indeed, Cosby has acknowledged that for a time the show perhaps became a bit too educational:

"We were sort of tripling up on the reinforcing of certain moral aspects in trying to teach values" (Carter, B1).

Most important, though, *COSBY* is in part a sitcom version of those popular how-to-parent books, just as Cosby's own best-selling books are light comic versions of the same model. Within the narrow conventions of commercial television, the show tries to educate its adult audience to little tricks of parenting and to educate its younger viewers to agree with and respect their parents. To secure an upper middle-class audience, the show appeals to that audience's values of education and therapy, in doing so offering an attractive model for working-class families as well (Press).

But there is another dimension to the discourse of education and parenting here. It's not just their own families that members of *COSBY*'s audience, always overwhelmingly white, are concerned about. It's also, and separately, black families. Since the 1960s, a consistent voice of conventional wisdom, taken more or

less seriously by many educated people, has maintained that poverty and crime among African Americans are caused by problems in the African American family. Argued most famously in the so-called Moynihan report, thoroughly attacked and refuted often since, this view is held so insistently by so many who should know better that perhaps it appeals to some need to believe. Never mind racism and structural unemployment, focusing on problems of the black family stops the analysis before it can implicate the white majority.

It's *their* problem, not our racism. It was, after all, an avowedly anti-racist liberal, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, now the Democratic senator from New York, who introduced to public discourse the notion of "pathology" regarding female-headed African American families (Downing 49-50). The theory remains profoundly patriarchal, and anti-woman, because it assumes that to be a "family," mothers and their children need men (Moynihan). For the last twenty-five years, the theory has mostly functioned to blame the victims, charging black males with being too weak to assume their proper place. In its terms, its definitions of mature social roles, the theory rearticulates black masculinity as a state of failure. But in doing so, as Downing says, it ignores the force of racism and structural unemployment in the construction of African American life.

With political reaction, a superficial concern about the black family rose in the 1970s and 1980s. The single black mother on welfare and the irresponsible, immature black father were selected and magnified as mythical figures of public concern, symbolic condensations of the white majority's disavowal of its own racism. And Bill Cosby was the right pitchman at the right time. He became the model dad not only for whites but also for what many whites (and some blacks) thought that blacks needed. Motivating Cosby's audience is not only the wish to improve or repair their own families but also the wish not to be thought of as racist, or even responsible for others' racism. Praise for the show as "colorblind" is also flattery for its audience; to like the show is to prove oneself above prejudice.

Nevertheless, Cosby's patriarchal role on the show can be seen as an attempt to remediate white stereotypes of absent African American fathers as well as an attempt to model dominant ideals for blacks. It certainly cuts against the "message of 'Black male criminality'" as a "constant refrain" (Strickland 52). But in doing so, COSBY reproduces patriarchal discourse. Although the show takes on issues of gender, it does so gently. Cosby's character inevitably joins in any critique of sexism articulated in the show's story, validating both the critique and the father's own ultimate authority. In Downing's words, it is "patriarchy with a human face" (60; also see Taylor 161-162).

This is exemplified by one of COSBY'S opening credit sequences, as Ellen Seiter has incisively shown: performers playing wife and children (who are given roughly equal stature) celebrate Cosby as they dance around him, literalizing the show's phallocentrism (32-39). In the episode we looked at, the opening scene following the first group of commercials has Cosby and Rashad, who plays the family lawyer-mother-wife, making fun of others' sexism, exchanging sex role barbs, and speaking normal sitcom banter with other cast members. Then Rashad's character walks out toward the set's side door, saying "It's time for me to prepare dinner now," as if there were no connection between the earlier discussion of sexism and the person who routinely does the housework.[9] As Andrea Press has observed,

the show's scripts minimize the conflicts of working mothers (80).

Curiously, the discussion of sexism had revolved around the remark Rashad says an opposing lawyer made to her in court: "What do you know about anything? You should be home taking care of your children." The remark's structure reproduces the politics of the show. "What do you know about anything?" could be racist as well as sexist, but for many viewers the second sentence might well close down the possibility of such a reading. The permitted mild critique of sexism displaces the forbidden critique of racism. Given the necessity for tension even in a sitcom, the references to hostile sexism may be dramatically necessary. They fill the gap created by the omission of racism in the stories, racism one might expect in a show about an African American family, no matter how affluent, attractive, or bright

For the show, as Real and Downing say, is also unwilling to take on what might provide a different source of dramatic tension-class conflict. As Downing argues, THE COSBY SHOW "may celebrate the virtues of upper-middle-class existence as the most desirable way of life to which the vast mass of citizens can reasonably aspire" (67). Yet it does so at the cost of ignoring, for example, the disastrous effects of gentrification on the poor, which residences like the Huxtable family's would presumably intensify (69), to say nothing of the violence and fear of urban life. This celebration has become crucial to Cosby's persona in his middle age. Few actors are as visible on television, considering how often the show is broadcast in syndication, how many products advertisers pay Cosby to smile at, and how frequently the ads appear. Whatever his own politics, as Edwin Barton suggested to us, Cosby has become the Dr. Feelgood of the American way.

In many ways Bill Cosby was an appropriate figure to bring together the elements that made the show the most successful comedy program in TV history. For most U.S. viewers, Cosby was probably best known before THE COSBY SHOW as a salesman for General Foods, Ford, Texas Instruments, Coke, and E.F. Hutton. The length of this list is only one evidence of Cosby's value as pitchman. Selling products on TV is still often regarded as a sign of declining celebrity status, of cashing in your chips on the way down, and Cosby's move from pitchman to series star seems unusual. This may indicate that the commercial imperative of network TV is eroding residual distinctions between stars and salespeople. As Mark Crispin Miller has pointed out, "Cosby himself ascribes his huge following to his appearances in the ads: 'I think my popularity came from doing solid 30-second commercials. They can cause people to love you and see more of you than in a full 30-minute show'" (207).

Cosby's credibility rating, measured by marketers' Q -scale, has often topped all others' in recent years. Could it be that his credibility was actually increased through his appearances in ads? If so, it could mark a significant change in the relation of programs and commercials. As Raymond Williams argued, differences between the two are deceptive; they are faces of the same culture (70). Cosby's career could indicate an attenuation of these residual differences, a convergence in the seemingly divergent and heterogeneous fragments that compose the "flow" of commercial television (Williams; also see Browne, and Budd, Craig, and Steinman).

Of course, Cosby was never just a pitchman. His credibility is also based on long exposure in movies and comedy records, in previous TV series (especially I SPY in

the 1960s), as a standup comic, and as a talk show guest. In marketing terms, his career has been strongly *synergistic*: These appearances all function as ads for each other; the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. His work in commercials has been seamlessly integrated into this product, indeed became by the early 1980s its most important element. How often do you see stars of popular current series also appearing on ads? Even more disconcerting: How often do you see them selling *during their shows?*

Yet there is Cosby hawking Jell-O during THE COSBY SHOW, mugging and smirking for the kids in the ad just as he does for the Huxtable kids right before and after, charming them and us and everyone in sight. Pushing back the frontiers of commodification, the Cosby phenomenon suggests possibilities. Could Coke and Jell-O be integrated into the little problems and quick solutions of Huxtable life? As Ella Taylor puts it, "THE COSBY SHOW offers the same pleasures as a television commercial-a parade of gleaming commodities and expensive designer clothing unabashedly enjoyed by successful professional families" (160). Where can we buy one of those fancy sweaters Cosby's always wearing?

As the dominant star of this dominant series of the 1980s, Cosby may be a leader in a larger trend in commercial television. The synergy of his program and ad appearances brings closer than ever the two halves of TV's dialectic, of its flow. The commercial imperative gradually destroys the autonomy of program and ad as discrete cultural forms, and it instrumentalizes them as converging parts of a larger purpose, a means to profit. As yet, the convergence retains limits: If programs (the free lunch) and ads (the hidden price) were to become too much alike, and their boundaries too indistinct, the dialectic between the two would collapse, and audiences would lose their necessary credulity. This critical mass of show and commercial generates the magical heat of capital, produces the nihilistic energy of advanced capitalism itself from the destruction of its cultural material as separate entities. Perhaps the synergy of television, of consumer culture itself, depends on a long slow assimilation of other forms and traditions and purposes to those of selling and consuming, a process rationalized and administered by the visible hand of marketing management.

Within this context, that the show idealizes affluence and fails to mention race or class conflict, and that its critique of sexism is so mild, make sense. After all, its purpose in life as far as its sponsors and distributors are concerned is to attract viewers for sale in bundles to advertisers. A look at the four ads between the show's credits and its opening scene in the episode we looked at provides the evidence:

1. FTD Easter Baskets.
2. Country Crock Cheese Products.
3. McDonald's Salads.
4. K-Mart's No-Nonsense Panty Hose.

Most viewers of THE COSBY SHOW are women (Downing 71n), and all four of the ads seem aimed squarely at women as consumers (not at women as feminists — the Country Crock ad, for example, centers on a woman serving food to a man). With the possible exception of 1), all four aim at poor to middle-class women, who likely make up much if not most of the audience, given their number in the population at large. Three of the four ads are narrated by males with voices trained to connote authority, an authority that for some viewers may flow from and into the

patriarchal form and connotations of the show. None of the ads is narrated by a woman. In no ad does a woman directly address the audience. All of the ads sell women products to make others happy or to enhance their appearance for others to see. Crucially, like COSBY, all four ads are upbeat. Their world has no place for grating racism, class conflict, or serious questioning of patriarchal sex roles.

\*\*\*\*\*

Culture crisscrosses the internal structure of the commercial TV business. This combination circumscribes the show when it is produced, when it is distributed, and when it is consumed (Davis; Gray, "Black Male"). The blandness of television suffuses nearly everything on the air save unavoidable bursts of bad news. It has been guaranteed by public policy, which licenses most VHF stations to corporations whose interests are explicitly commercial. And, under Reagan-Bush, this public policy has gutted much of what little public-interest regulation (the fairness doctrine, serious limitations on the commercialization of programming for children) once existed to serve noncommercial values. Although the founding Communications Act of 1934 says broadcasting is supposed to serve the "public interest, convenience, and necessity," the stations in practice have little obligation to do so. And in fact they do not, unless "public interest" is defined as "what sells."

In this environment, no matter the personal politics of anyone connected with the program, as a product of the final phase of mass-audience television programming, THE COSBY SHOW could be accepted, made, and distributed only as long as it has remained, as Real puts it, "reformist conservative" (120). This was especially true during the Reagan years. No mass-audience text/product can ever win unanimous consent, yet during this period COSBY perhaps reached the limit-point of intertextual identity with the culture of its audience. On the show, in the ads, in the minds of the pro-Reagan majority at home, while it was Morning in America there was nary a problem that couldn't be solved by accentuating the positive.

In the early 1990s, changes in the television industry as well as changing politics already yield new forms, such as Fox's IN LIVING COLOR, a cabaret-style program with a predominantly African American cast. Its sexually charged (if heterosexist) sense of humor undoubtedly offends the same older, more conservative viewers Fox has eschewed with THE SIMPSONS and other shows. Indeed, as the mass audience disperses and the networks search for new groups of viewers to market to advertisers, African Americans (for years undercounted or ignored) are becoming an increasingly important demographic group.

Perhaps because so many are too poor to afford more expensive alternatives, African Americans make up 20 percent of the networks' prime-time audience, though they are only 12 percent of the population. By one count African American households watch an average of nearly 70 hours a week of television, 48 percent more than others in the United States. And black households tend to have more females and more young people than U.S. households generally — demographic groups most advertisers like because they do more than their share of household shopping (Michaelson 78). Any network show with a solid African American viewership has a commercial head start.

So more blacks than ever had secondary roles in dramatic series on the 1991-92 U.S. television schedule, though their number was still much less than it would

have been if casting had ignored ethnicity. Ten of the fifty-two weekly comedy series this fall starred black performers (Du Brow, "Networks," F1). But none of the dramas at this writing has confronted ordinary contemporary racism (several are set in the past), and all the comedies retain COSBY's most important constraint. Whatever their appeal to black audiences, they must offer whites lots of laughs. The opening episodes of two of the shows (TRUE COLORS and ROC) included gags that insulted the ideas of Malcolm X (e.g., joking that his followers would like "white devil's food cake"), making COSBY's avoidance of racial issues in comparison seem honorable. Comedy or drama, black audience or not, these shows still need to please substantial groups of whites to survive.

*There has never been a successful television drama that centered on African American family life*, no THE WALTONS or LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE, let alone DALLAS or DYNASTY, FALCON CREST, or KNOTS LANDING.

According to Rick Du Brow, who writes about the television industry for the *Los Angeles Times*, "You can almost count on the fingers of one hand the number of black family drama series." [10] This, he says, is due to network executives' "unspoken belief that white viewers don't want to watch a series about black reality" ("TV's Shame" F1). Du Brow blames racism in network thinking and hiring practices, and he argues that new attention to African American viewers by the A.C. Nielsen ratings firm and other surveys could bring about change. Yet he may be underestimating the culture of racism.

In ETHNIC NOTIONS, his telling history of racist representations, Marlon Riggs points out that the flourishing of the Abolitionist movement was accompanied by a jump in white attendance at minstrel shows. Such shows signified white power and black subservience, precisely when that power began openly to be questioned.

COSBY succeeds in part because whites can count on it for an entertaining encounter with African Americans who will neither make them "feel the villain" nor entirely abandon the gestures and movements that give familiar pleasure to many whites (Lewis, 183, 180). In that sense, the show fulfills a long-running strain of European American desire. Humor bound by rules of reassurance helps "preserve the existing system of power relations" (Dubin 131). Similarly, whatever his skill as a dramatic actor, Bill Cosby evidently cannot be the star of a dramatic show that would have anywhere near the success of COSBY. Even FRANK'S PLACE, an artful, not especially confrontational "dramedy" of 1987 that featured African Americans in ways Gray argues were less assimilationist, could not attract more than a quarter of the viewing audience ("Recodings"). That tens of millions of people chose to watch the show was not enough. To profit, CBS needed more of an audience to sell to advertisers. Of course, the inability of FRANK'S PLACE to become a hit could have been due to its adventurous narrative and visual style, its refusal of a laugh track, or scheduling, or other factors having nothing to do with race (see White 83-86). Still, says Gray, the commercial failure of the show "reinforced the limited terms within which the general American television audience can exploit the interiors of black social and cultural life" (Gray, "Recodings," 128).

Eddie Murphy's comedies may be big box-office hits, but what films do well with African Americans as heroic leads, layered with the characteristic sexual glow of European American stars? In this sense, we should see THE COSBY SHOW, like most any thriving U.S. mass-audience entertainment with an African American cast, as a register of the enduring force of Jim Crow. Humor helps keep Cosby from

arousing the stereotypical sexual fears that African American men in some contexts still seem to evoke in whites. In the middle of THE COSBY SHOW's successful run, George Bush's 1988 campaign commercial starring Willie Horton showed the enduring, evocative power of a key term in racist mythology — the black rapist, whose animalistic sexuality threatens white women. That Cosby could succeed in playing an obstetrician, many of whose patients presumably would be white, suggests how effectively the show's humor displaces this potential sexual threat. Cosby knows audiences will pay him for their amusement. "As long as you have the joke," he says, "you know you have the security that people will laugh" (Christon 47).

Even conservatives in the United States acknowledge that the legal gains African Americans made in the 1960s and 1970s have not been matched by a general rise in their standard of living. White power and prejudice in the United States have proven so dynamic that the elimination of legal barriers to upward social mobility for African Americans has not in itself been able to create genuinely equal opportunity. This encourages even the most racist whites to abandon public and official racism — the last twenty years have shown they have nothing to lose by this — and to seize the initiative by denying responsibility for inequality and blaming the victims instead. As Robert T. Carter has argued, "Ignoring race as an important variable may in itself be racist" ("Sex and Racism").

Illogically, and no doubt against the wishes of its makers, THE COSBY SHOW has become evidence for the bigoted that the major barriers to African American success are within the African American community itself. They are implicitly supported by African American Republicans like Clarence Thomas and Tony Brown, who argue that the issues are moral character, personal values, and "self-help" rather than racism and its effects, in a system that affords the already-privileged with more help than they need (Benjamin).

At the same time, appropriating the old critique of racism, bigoted whites now argue that more profound measures to enhance racial equality (affirmative action, the setting aside of some public works for minority businesses) are racist themselves. For David Duke, the Klansman who nearly became a U.S. senator in 1990,

"Affirmative action is racism...That's the kind of philosophy Nazi Germany used...If it is morally wrong to discriminate against a black person — and all of us would endorse that principle — then certainly it's got to be morally wrong to discriminate against a white person"  
(Ridgeway 21).

Mean and perverse as it is, such born-again egalitarianism is heard more and more from the right and center. Social scientists call it "modern racism," as opposed to traditional, segregationist racism. Polls suggest that support for integration in principle is at an all-time high ("Crisis" 30). The new racism has three major components: emotional hostility toward African Americans who seem "too demanding"; resistance to the political arguments of African Americans for expanded government intervention; and conviction that racism is dead in the United States (See Entman; McConahay; and Sears — there is some disagreement about the term and its definition[11]). Surely in practice racists are both modern and traditional, with the older attitudes more prevalent in private. THE COSBY

SHOW does take on segregationist racism, and no doubt it rubs some traditional racists the wrong way (Lewis 178-179). Yet its commercial success and political failure is that it does not confront modern racism, and could even confirm or legitimate it. It may temper emotional hostility toward African Americans, but only toward those who smile on cue and act properly assimilationist and middle-class. It reliably does not raise political demands and it does not argue for the persistence of racism. In this framework, the remark of whites that the show provides good role models for blacks signifies its unwitting complicity with modern racism.

Robert Entman has analyzed a similar trend in local television news programs in Chicago. Superficially, representations of African Americans on the news might seem contradictory: The increasing presence of black newsmen and bureaucrats clashes with the unfavorable figuring of black criminals and of politicians arguing for African American interests. Yet, as Entman points out, blacks he observed in authoritative roles spoke the language of middle-class whites and "did not talk in angry tones" (341). While surveys show blacks more than whites tend to see such issues as crime and discrimination as inseparable, black journalists covered the news according to the same frames as their white colleagues who see the issues as discrete (341, 344n). Contradictions are resolved in the realm of reinforcement and pleasure: Modern racists may feel good about themselves for tolerating blacks who (to keep their jobs) make no issue of their ethnicity; meanwhile, these racists can despise blacks who, in "high proportion" in television news, appear "angry or demanding" (341).

As racism has changed, so must its critique. Modern racism's denial of its own existence inoculates it against empirical challenge. Consequently, racist discourses must now be disinterred in contemporary texts and practices that pride themselves on being "colorblind"; analyzing absence becomes more crucial than ever. Week after week (in syndication, day after day, hour after hour), an African American man appears in tens of millions of homes as an attractive choice for everywoman's obstetrician (Downing 62). Yet simultaneously absent from view are the preventable ways the United States lets its African American infants die, at double the rate of whites (Scott). For infants who grow into adulthood, the carnage of neglect multiplies. African American men under 45 are ten times more likely to die of hypertension than those of European descent (Strickland 112). "I don't think either of the races could take it," says Cosby, "if we began to lay it out and tell the truth" (Graham).

## NOTES

1. Thanks to members of the Society for Cinema Studies and to colleagues at California State University, Bakersfield, and Florida Atlantic University who helpfully commented on earlier versions of this paper, to Kim Flachmann and Michael Flachmann for helping to sharpen the argument; and to Lynn Appleton, Reza Azarsa, Tom Banks, Robert Entman, Lynn Garrett, Kenneth Goings, Dan Hahn, Linda Hazelwood, Elizabeth Jackson, Carlos Nelson, Diana Saco, Deborah Whitworth, Forrest Wood, and especially Edwin Barton for their contributions.
2. Adapting Joel Kovel's definition: "the tendency of a society to degrade and do violence to people" based on ancestral origin (xii).
3. Exemplary of the way commercial media report racism was the favorable,

extensive coverage given to Nelson Mandela's 1990 anti-apartheid tour compared to the lack of coverage normally devoted to ordinary racism in the United States. This coverage, like most mainstream news accounts of South Africa, helped ratify the developing convention that reporting on explicit racists no longer requires balance and fairness, or even civility. For example, on Feb. 13, 1990, a journalist on National Public Radio's ALL THINGS CONSIDERED asked a South African opposed to majority rule if he feared that a "black majority would treat whites as badly as you have treated them." Usually, the politics of mainstream journalism can be discerned from the list of those whose comments require no balance; rarely do they appear so explicitly in reporters' questions. That they did here signals the major change in racism's semiotic terrain discussed below.

4. Rooney also wrote a homophobic letter to *The Advocate*, a national gay weekly. It is unclear to what extent CBS was reacting to that as well. In any case, the suspension was lifted after viewer complaints, allowing CBS to appear concerned about racism without losing a star. For an account of the Rooney affair, see Hentoff.

5. See Gans for a critique of "culture of poverty" theory. "I wish," he says, "that social scientists would decrease their study of the victims of poverty and devote more research to its causes — the economic, political, and other processes by which America has developed by far the highest rate of poverty in the 'first world' of highly developed nations."

6. A look at race and higher education, often promoted on the show as a route to success, bears this out African Americans are disproportionately absent from the nation's colleges; a disproportionate number who do attend fail to graduate (by 1986, only 9.9 percent of 1980 high school seniors who were African American had received a bachelor's degree, compared to 26.1 percent of non-Latino whites) (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, Sept. 5, 1990, 13). According to a 1990 report (Harrison), the relative few who do make it through four years of college are half as likely as white college graduates to earn more than \$36,000 a year (13.1 percent versus 26.1 percent). For more on racism and education, see Kozol.

7. THE COSBY SHOW is hardly unique in guaranteeing audiences against offense from unwanted social claims. In the 1980s, *Newsweek* and *Time* both routinely reported the political agenda of such groups as the National Urban League in Reaganite terms comforting to centrist and conservative whites, for example representing affirmative action as reverse discrimination in disguise (Daniel and Allen).

8. Supporting Vidmar and Rokeach's account of selective perception of ALL IN THE FAMILY, Venise T. Berry's interviews with viewers indicate that African American women watching THE COSBY SHOW tend to see the Rashad character winning the weekly battle of the sexes. Younger African American men, Betty has found, tend to see the Cosby character failing to meet their expectations of how men should behave with women.

9. Apparently, this is typical of the show. According to Lewis, 'It is Claire's [played by Rashad] job, not Cliff's [Cosby's role] to make the dinner (Cliff's...attempts in the kitchen...are sometimes comically inept)." Characteristically, this scenario makes possible a multiple appeal, allowing women to take "more pleasure in the

show's feminist moments" while seeing to it that men are not threatened by anti-sexist humor — men for whom it would be "unsettling...if Cliff played Claire's domestic role" (168-171).

10. The 1990-91 television season included a new dramatic series on ABC starring James Earl Jones, GABRIEL'S FIRE, which referred to racism and to corruption among political elites. Jones and Madge Sinclair, also in the cast, won Emmy awards for theft acting. The show did poorly in the ratings, so for 1991-92 ABC, a "new 'lighthearted' concept" in mind (King), switched the show's setting from inner-city Chicago to Los Angeles jettisoned all cast members except Jones and Sinclair, added a European American costar (Richard Crenna), and transformed it into PROS & CONS, a buddy-buddy detective comedy. Moved into the "8 p.m. Thursday graveyard" (Aulena 290) against THE COSBY SHOW and THE SIMPSONS, the new version did not survive the season.

11. Conservatives have argued that "modern racism" is a specious epithet used to discredit honest, unbogated opposition to the proposals of liberal civil rights groups (See, e.g., Roth).

#### WORKS CITED

Auletta, Ken. *Three Blind Mice: How the TV Networks Lost Their Way*. New York: Random House, 1991.

Benjamin, Playthell. "GOP Goes the Weasel." *Village Voice* 20 Aug. 1991: 41-43.

Bennett, Tony, and Janet Woollacott. *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero*. New York: Methuen, 1987.

Bevy, Venise T. "Televised Images of Black Male Teens and Father Figures: The Perceptions of Low-Income Black Youth." Speech Communication Association. Chicago. 3 Nov. 1990.

Browne, Nick. "The Political Economy of the Television (Super) Text" *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9 (1984): 175-182.

Brownstein, Ronald. "Questions of Color: Dividing by Race in American Politics." *Los Angeles Times* 27 May 1990: M1+

Budd, Mike, and Clay Steinman. "*M\*A\*S\*H* Mystified: Capitalization, Dematerialization, Idealization." *Cultural Critique* 10 (1988): 59-75.

Budd, Mike, Steve Craig, and Clay Steinman. "*Fantasy Island*: Marketplace of Desire." *Journal of Communication* 33 (1983): 67-77.

Carter, Bill. "Bill Cosby Hanging On Despite 'Simpsons.'" *The New York Times* 21 Feb. 1991: B1-2.

Christon, Lawrence. "The World According to the Cos." *Los Angeles Times Calendar* 10 Dec. 1989: 6+.

THE COSBY SHOW. NBC. KGET, Bakersfield, CA. 12 Apr. 1990.

Daniel, Jack L, and Anita L. Allen. "News Magazines, Public Policy and the Black Agenda." *Discourse and Discrimination*. Ed. Geneva Smitherman-Donaidson and Teun A. Van Dijk. Detroit Wayne State UP, 1988. 23-45.

Dates, Jannette L. "Commercial Television." *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media*. Ed. Jannette Dates and William Barlow. Washington, D.C.: Howard UP, 1990.253-302.

Davis, Ossie. "Where are the Black Image-Makers Hiding?" *Black Families and the Medium of Television*. Ed. Anthony Jackson. Ann Arbor: Bush Program in Child Development & Social Policy-U of Michigan, 1982. 61-69.

Downing, John D. H. "The Cosby Show and American Racial Discourse." *Discourse and Discrimination*. Ed. Geneva Smitherman-Donaldson and Teun A. Van Dijk. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1988. 46-73.

Dubin, Steven C. "Symbolic Slavery: Black Representations in Popular Culture." *Social Problems* 34 (April 1987): 122-140.

Du Brow, Rick. "Networks Court Black Audience." *Los Angeles Times* 28 Sept. 1991: F1+

— — - "TV's Shame: Lack of Dramas on Black Life." *Los Angeles Times* 9 June 1990: F1+

Entman, Robert M. "Modern Racism and the Images of Blacks in Local TV News." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 7 (1990): 332-345.

Gans, Herbert L "Fighting the Biases Embedded in Social Concepts of the Poor." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 8 Jan. 1992: A56

Gates, Henry Louis Jr. "TV's Black World Turns — But Stays Unreal." *The New York Times* 12 Nov. 1989: 1+. We are grateful to Jane Desmond for alerting us to this source.

Gold, Todd. "Bill Cosby: The Doctor Is In." *The Saturday Evening Post* (April 1985): 42-45.

Graham, Jefferson. "Family, Not Race, Is Focus." *USA Today* 26 Oct. 1989: 3D.

Gray, Herman. "Recodings: Possibilities and Limitations in Commercial Television Representations of African American Culture." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 13(1991): 117130.

— — - "Television and the New Black Man: Black Male Images in Prime-Time Situation Comedy." *Media, Culture and Society* 8 (1986): 223-242.

— — - "Television. Black Americans, and the American Dream." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6 (1989): 376-386.

Harrison, Bennett. "For Blacks, a Degree Doesn't Automatically Mean Higher Incomes." *Los Angeles Times* 2 Sept. 1990: M4.

Hentoff, Nat. "The Cowardly Lions at CBS News." *Village Voice* 20 Mar. 1990: 24-25.

— — - "The Insatiable Lust to Suppress Speech." *Village Voice* 13 Mar. 1990: 22-23.

Jackson, Elizabeth. "Barbara McCullough, independent filmmaker. 'Know how to do something different'" [interview]. *Jump Cut* 36 (1991): 94-97.

King, Susan. "Doogie Moves Out, Woody Walks the Aisle, Delta Departs." *Los Angeles Times TV Times* 8 Sept. 1991: 20.

Kovel, Joel. *White Racism: A Psychohistory*. 2nd ed. New York: Columbia UP, 1984.

Kozol, Jonathan. *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*. New York: Crown. 1991.

Lewis, Justin. *The Ideological Octopus: An Exploration of Television and Its Audience. Studies in Culture and Communication*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

McConahay, John B. "Modern Racism, Ambivalence, and the Modern Racism Scale." *Prejudice, Discrimination, and Racism: Theory and Research*. Ed. John F. Dovidio and Samuel L. Gaertner. New York: Academic Press, 1986. 91-125.

Michaelson, Judith. "TV Adjusts Its Mirror." *Los Angeles Times Calendar* 22 Sept. 1991: 5+.

Miller, Mark Crispin. "Deride and Conquer." *Watching Television: A Pantheon Guide to Popular Culture*. Ed. Todd Gitlin. New York: Pantheon, 1987: 183-228.

Moynihan, Daniel Patrick. *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Washington: Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, 1965.

Press, Andrea. *Women Watching Television: Gender, Class, and Generation in the American Television Experience*. Philadelphia U of Pennsylvania P, 1991.

Real, Michael. *Super Media: A Cultural Studies Approach*. Communication and Human Values. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989.

Ridgeway, James. "Here He Comes, Mr. America: When Whites Become a Minority in This Country, David Duke Will Be the Future." *Village Voice* 9 Oct. 1990: 21+.

Riggs, Marlon. *Ethnic Notions*. California Newsreel, 1987.

Roth, Byron M. "Social Psychology's 'Racism.'" *The Public Interest* 98 (Winter 1990): 26-36.

Scott, Janny. 'Why Does the Racial Gap Exist?' *Los Angeles Times* 1 Dec. 1990: 1+.

Sears, David O. "Symbolic Racism." *Eliminating Racism: Profiles in Controversy*. Ed. Phyllis A. Katz and Dahna A. Taylor. New York: Plenum, 1988. 53-84.

Seiter, Ellen. "Semiotics and Television." *Channels of Discourse: Television and*

*Contemporary Criticism*. Ed. Robert C. Allen. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina. P, 1987. 17-41.

"Sex and Racism," *Columbia* (Fall 1990): 17.

Strickland, William. "The Future of Black Men." *Essence* November 1989: 50+.

Taylor, Ella. *Prime-Time Families: Television Culture in Post-War America*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1989.

Vidmar, Neil, and Milton Rokeach. "Archie Bunker's Bigotry: A Study in Selective Perception and Exposure." *Journal of Communication* 24(1974): 36-47.

White, Mimi. "What's the Difference? FRANK'S PLACE in Television." *Wide Angle* 13. 3-4 (July-October 1991): 82-93.

Williams, Raymond. *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. New York: Schocken, 1975.

---

# Salvador and Noriega

by John Caldwell

from *Jump Cut*, no. 37, July 1992, pp. 15-29

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1992, 2006

## CONVULSIONS OF TOPICALITY

War makes good television. Especially if by good one means spectacular, visual and all-encompassing. But looking at the coverage of the Gulf War, we can see there is more to the politics of war on television than objectivity, censorship, and "coverage." Even though many accounts rightly criticized the way television covered the war, and the way the government managed information about it, fewer dealt with the effect the conflict had on programming in general.[1][[open notes in new window](#)] Wars have become special events that send ripples throughout programming. Broadcasters (not just Pentagon briefers) have become spin-doctors for such events and learn to exploit unfolding conflict in the name of viewership and ratings. Not only have wars become media texts, they have become contexts that transform other texts in substantive ways.

In this essay I will examine the formal ways that television appropriates, resuscitates and redefines dated films in response to fast breaking historical and political events. Television does not just gather and re-present selected films around contemporary events. It also encroaches upon and stylistically reworks those earlier films into fundamentally new and hybrid forms. After reviewing some of the issues involved in this kind of broadcast adaptation, I will closely analyze, with images and transcriptions, eleven specific ways that visual and videographic style is used to transform the feature film on television. As feature films are broadcast nightly to mass audiences, they are extensively interspersed with "reality" material. My hope in this study is to come to a better understanding of the ideological effects of such a hybridizing process. Videographic and electronic production equipment has evolved to provide more and more stylistic options for programmers. Because of this, the actual visual and narrative presentation of features also becomes increasingly complex. A closer look at these stylistic operations suggests that more is at stake politically than television's avowed interest in the present and the current. "Urgency" merely indicates the broadcasters' explicit motives for and interest in the transforming process. The televisual soup that results from broadcast hybridization involves a play and conflation of cultural signs this production of signs has far wider social implications.

Mass culture in the past decade has been particularly fond of turning history (war)

into fiction (film and television), and fiction into history. This same late cold-war period has also witnessed a string of imperial "practice wars"—the Falkland Islands, Lebanon, Granada, Panama, and the Persian Gulf. In the absence of anything larger, more nuclear or more apocalyptic, first world governments have repeatedly used provisional conflicts to test out new, expensive and otherwise unused hi-tech weapons, military tactics, and global political strategies. These neo-colonial practice wars clearly bring practical and economic benefits. Such wars justify military budgets (along with hardware), and the resulting globalism legitimizes continued military growth.

But broadcasters who cover or even refer to such events also benefit. In the analysis that follows, I hope to show how one recent practice-war, Panama, honed broadcaster's programming and aesthetic skills by economically resuscitating "dead" media texts. Spin doctoring and impression-management are used as stylistic and aesthetic processes as well as political tools.

Consider the following three incidents.

- 1) A Los Angeles news anchor appears in a newsbreak during the broadcast of a film and asks viewers to "stay tuned following our movie" for a major exposé on the mob in Los Angeles. The film interrupted by the newsbreak is *THE GODFATHER II*.
- 2) After over three years in captivity, a second U.S. hostage is released by Islamic terrorists. KTLA Television programs and broadcasts its mini-series *VOYAGE OF TERROR: THE ACHILLE LAURO AFFAIR* the same week. The station advertises its mini-series as "a remarkable *true story*" of Islamic terrorists, with "new facts never before released." Along with these proclamations of the real, less visible disclaimers within the program suggest that portions of the show are "dramatized" fictions.
- 3) Finally, for weeks preceding the premiere of the miniseries *DRUG WARS: THE CAMARENA STORY*, NBC heavily promotes the broadcast event as having broken "Long before Noriega." The mini-series itself dramatizes covert actions by the U.S. government with D.E.A. operations in Mexico. However, advertisements and promotions for the show refer instead to the unfolding U.S. invasion of *Panama*, an operation launched to depose accused drug lord, President General Manuel Noriega.

All three incidents suggest the varying degrees to which television is fueled by textual shifts between fiction and "reality." In one instance, the station uses a fiction film to contextualize a "factual" exposé on the mob. In the second docufiction, the historical climate of contemporary terrorism infiltrates to promote both the station's news and programming departments. In the third case, the station makes explicit reference to current military events and Noriega's history as an interpretive allegory for understanding NBC's previously produced, reality-based, fiction on Camarena.

Curiously in each case television does not try to hide its ontological and textual distinctions. Rather, it flaunts and exploits the distinctions: news vs. film, history vs. entertainment, and reality vs. fiction.<sup>[2]</sup> The terms in each of the polarities are wielded by stations as part of a process of self-interpretation and self-valuation.

Such distinctions are in fact explicitly part of the language of programming and marketing.

This phenomenon suggests perhaps that good viewers are in part "good" because they know and can value such distinctions. In a volatile and shifting process, television *assigns* historical and fictional status. Late-breaking historical events can rapidly change the value and currency of pre-existing fictional texts. Good broadcasting in this respect, and in an economic sense, is like Claude Lévi-Strauss' "bricolage" — it can fabricate new value out of existing and outdated textual material. In programming, bricolage, history and reality are frequently marshaled as the material stuff of refabrication. Television's process of assigning fictional and historical status, and the formal ways that it transforms texts, deserve to be looked at more closely.

I have chosen the broadcast premiere of Oliver Stone's film SALVADOR as a basis for analysis because of the important role that televisuality plays in its adaptation. "Televisuality," as I am using the term in this article, refers to the growing tendency of U.S. television to "perform and flaunt excessive visual style." I argue in more depth elsewhere, that since 1980 this "self-consciously aesthetic" stance, represents an emerging and dominant paradigm in U.S. broadcasting. Stylistic and televisual excess challenges many popular academic views of the medium as glance-like, low-resolution, rhetorical, transmissional, live, and instantaneous.[3]

SALVADOR is significant for my study since it makes explicit reference to recent historical events. It was also clearly programmed in and around the U.S. involvement in Central America. It was also tied specifically to the U.S. invasion of Panama. KCOP-Channel 13 in Los Angeles aired and adapted the film, in fact, on the very day Noriega was brought to arraignment in Miami. Along with numerous references to current events in Panama, the broadcast also functioned as a mechanism to set up and promote other programming on Channel 13.[4] As we will see, national distinctions of the sort that separate the countries of Central America seemed, in this case, to have little value to US. television programmers. El Salvador, SALVADOR, Nicaragua, and Panama, appeared as one and the same phenomenon in this week's multi-textual programming soup.

The broadcast of SALVADOR is only one example of fictional programming presented around the theme of U.S. Latin American relations. The week of January 1-8, 1990, in fact had many fictional broadcasts on related themes. In this context, the first week of January and the second week of the invasion included programming rife with references to Latin American relations, politics, and mythologies. Within the four day period in which SALVADOR was broadcast twice, the heavily advertised and promoted NBC mini-series DRUG WARS: THE CAMARENA STORY premiered on January 7.[5] In the face of the same recent historical events, ABC came up with their own timely offering, the fictional allegory, HEARTBREAK RIDGE. Clint Eastwood's version of the 1983 Grenada invasion offered to programmers an explicit and accessible foreign-policy map of the Panama action. Both as a generic update of the war picture and as Hollywood's vision of gunboat diplomacy in the Reagan era, the film helped "naturalize" the more recent invasion. Granada, El Salvador, and Panama became interchangeable names in the "reality-based" archetypal program formula at work during that week.

Other films also kept Hispanic and Latin American issues on the "fictional" agenda.

The films LA BAMBÀ, and THE BORDER were broadcast at that time. In addition, the "news" discourse during the week constantly referred to and tied together the fictional films and historical realms. SALVADOR aired the day Noriega was introduced to U.S. justice. The film was repeatedly interrupted by news footage of Noriega being taken from Panama Television as an institution was clearly pondering recent media and political events. It did so by resuscitating and working over old fictions.

## WHAT TELEVISION ADDS

Televisual adaptation is not a subtractive process. Many viewers do assume that the broadcasting of a film is by nature reductive, since "missing" scenes elicit obvious protests from fans of certain films. However, a much more additive process also functions within the broadcast of films. My present analysis is directed at this additive, hybridizing process. Such a process characterizes and defines broadcast adaptation. A more complete analysis would show that even subtractive operations (e.g., those involving the elision and deletion of source material) create new structures and relationships within adapted texts. Space limitations, however, prevent me from fully discussing here the hybridizing results of those subtractive processes. I will also be unable to discuss other important hybridizing operations, such as censorship-related post-dubbing and automatic dialogue replacement (ADR).<sup>[6]</sup> Apart from those devices, however, a close analysis of the televised SALVADOR reveals a rich array of stylistic operations which expand the original film and recombine it with other elements. Such processes redefine and re-interpret adapted works for television viewers.

## STATION SET-UPS / PROMOS / PRE-TEXT<sup>[7]</sup>

Marketing and promotion function both before and within the adaptation. Consider the station promo "setting up" the broadcast. The announcer states: "Tomorrow at 8:00, James Wood stars in the Oliver Stone production offering a scathing look at a torn country's social injustice, as seen through the eyes of a news photographer, in SALVADOR." The promo does not just emphasize time/place information but also, through narrative synopsis, offers interpretation. Several factors in this promo create an interpretive frame, and it is a frame that works to personalize the political dimension of the film. First, the promo uses the stardom of James Woods to set up the show. Second, the synopsis sets up a hierarchy of point-of-view. It does not focus on El Salvador as a country, but on the journalist's distanced and personal ("through the eyes") perspective. Third, the promo gives a personal spin to the film by making reference to it as an "Oliver Stone production." This tactic clearly links the televised film with Stone's media notoriety. His award winning film BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY was released in December and January, and Stone's activities both on and off-screen were newsworthy events during that time.

By promoting and framing itself in this way, several things happen to the television text. First, the program pitches itself as a directorial statement and a star vehicle. The plot synopsis emphasizes the "statement's" subjective and personal nature. Because of this, from the start the viewer's experience of the film is heavily mediated by frameworks that distance him/her from any Central American "reality." Directorial framing also sets up the broadcast event as an aesthetic phenomenon. An overtly political subject becomes transformed into an aesthetic

framework, and this kind of process aptly characterizes much in the program text that follows. The aesthetic "pose" of the film is its pre-text and pretense. Such an aesthetic emphasis focuses first, on the director's special aesthetic status, and second, on the nature of the film as a visual and eye-dependent spectacle. Both hybridizing traits hint at the degree to which televisuality (e.g., television's preoccupation with formal excess and aesthetic consciousness) is an integral part of broadcast adaptation.

#### GRAPHIC STILLS OF FRAMES CUT FROM (AND REWORKED INTO) FILM

This televisual adaptation, like others, includes a hybridizing operation that one might not expect to find in the textual reduction of a film for television. KCOP first "removed" a scene from the film but still used it for other purposes within and for the broadcast. In the sequence described above, a promo used by the station to advertise the broadcast of SALVADOR, one image is particularly curious.

Consider this image of execution, for it suggests that an iconic and narrative power survives in some footage even after abridgment. Of all the other images in the film, KCOP-13 chose this image to advertise the broadcast even though the station deleted it from the broadcast version of the film entirely. The scene depicts a government soldier being executed by a leftist guerrilla — a scene apparently either too graphic or too political for station censors/revisionists. Why would a station advertise the broadcast of a film with an image that it had first censored from the film?

The formal properties of the shot give some indication of the privileged status the shot has in the film. It has an odd, violent power, taken as it is in close-up, from a low-angle, and with a wide angle lens. In fact, this shot, along with one other, suggests an important "subtext" initiated by the film's characters. Early in the film, Boyle's buddy Cassidy, a more successful professional photographer, asserts that his ultimate objective is to get shots equivalent to the powerful images of Robert Capa taken during the Spanish Civil War. Those were shots taken, as Cassidy states, "while looking into the face of death." Boyle underscores this ideal by acting out the gesture of one of Capa's victim's caught at the moment of bullet's impact (fig.5)

Cassidy eventually gets what he wants. His final exposure is aimed at a strafing fighter that he photographs head-on. This photograph costs the photographer his life. Shortly before this scene, Cassidy photographed the shot used in the station's promo. There, he secretly used his 35mm rangefinder Leica, concealed and held at the waist, to photograph the execution.

The film places heavy directorial emphasis on these two shots as the *Capa*-like images aspired to earlier. Stone sets up the last incident with a heavy interchange of shot-reverse shots between Boyle and Cassidy. In addition, the leftists violently prevent Boyle, the main character, from witnessing the execution itself. Cassidy, on the other hand, senses the ensuing violence and risks his life to get the shot Stone underlines the *Capa*-like decisive moment by sealing it with an extreme close-up reaction shot of Cassidy quietly firing off his shutter.

Why is this scene "too hot" for the broadcast, yet useful in broadcast promos? It may lie in the nature of a "decisive moment" shot. This photographic aesthetic

privileges the smallest slices of time as the most profound and the most visually dynamic instant as the truest. Such an aesthetic characteristically downplays context, background, and political understanding. The decisive moment aesthetic privileges accidental compositions, extreme visuality and spectacle. In a phenomenological sense, then, decisive moment images typically remain open to diverse ideological readings and interpretations. As an existentially based aesthetic view, the theory dominated mid-twentieth century photojournalistic practice. It has since been criticized as naive and apolitical. However, such ideological naiveté and apoliticism give decisive moment imagery significant value within the operations of televisuality. The image that is censored is then reused because more than other images in the film, it remains open to appropriation precisely because it is fragmented and stripped of context. Television will present the image's violence as a frozen and emotional *composition* rather than a political act. As my analysis of elision will show, this kind of fragmenting and freezing operation are highly valued in televisuality. The film sets up Capa's decisive moment as part of its overall design strategy and then dramatizes that aesthetic at key moments. In this way, the film's cinematography begs for appropriation by the televisual text. In digital video effects terms, the frames are there for broadcasters to "grab." It does not matter whether or not the image is included or deleted from the final televised scene. Televisual adaptation does not cower or subordinate itself to broadcastings standards and practices editor. Censorship is a mute issue in cases like this one. Televisuality finds alternative ways to hybridize and reuse questionable, censored material.

#### GRAPHICS: STATION ID'S AND INTERTITLES

Like many televised movies, SALVADOR is graphically "stapled" to its programming slot. Various devices signify ownership. Chief among these graphic displays are the station ID's keyed or burned into the film's imagery in the lower third portion of the picture. One cannot imagine this sort of stamp of ownership being allowed in other art forms (e.g., the signature of the purchaser rather than the maker stamped into the art form itself). However, this is an almost universal practice in both broadcast and cable television.

Mise-en-scene in television is obviously not considered sacred or inviolable ground. In practice, the appropriated film offers broadcasters a kind of open, visual terrain. Upon this cinematic and visual turf, graphic signs promoting the station are erected. While the situation in El Salvador may be confusing, and the social implications of both the movie and recent events threatening, this graphic insemination of the spectacle works to mark, identify, and distance any horror that might reside in the original film. The televisual operation of graphic stapling implies two things. First, it suggests that the unfolding spectacle is "known," and second that it is also apparently "owned" by KCOP. The ideological packaging of film does not just happen through a process of *extra-textual* promotion. The process also occurs visually within the frame. Graphic packaging further reduces the televisual spectacle to a known and owned status; to that of object and commodity.

The most repetitious graphic hybrid in this adaptation comes from the "8 O'CLOCK MOVIE" identification. This icon precedes each program break as well as each of the film's televised segments. The shift from dramatic scene to advertisement does

not then occur directly. The segue from program to break and back only occurs through the agency of a program identification graphic. Whereas in previous examples, keyed graphics infiltrate the film directly, here connection with the film is enacted through visual and verbal reference. In each 8 O'CLOCK MOVIE identification, the station announcer repetitiously intones that "we will return to the KCOP presentation of SALVADOR after these messages." The audio reference changes each evening to a new and different film title, so even the repeated visual ID is redefined by narration on a nightly basis. There is a nightly process of renaming. Numerous films are lifted and verbally framed over the singular and unchanging station graphic. The infiltration of texts however becomes bi-directional. Keyed ID's over dramatic scenes redefine the fiction world, and audio references to the fiction world laid over graphics redefine the "real" world of broadcast. The process is two-fold and complementary. The seeming redundancy of this graphic/sound liturgy in station/program ID's might suggest that the industry fears the user's short term memory. The tactic also clearly demonstrates however that the "super-text" does not simply result from programming proximity or the juxtaposition of diverse texts within the broadcast "flow."<sup>[8]</sup> The super-text involves an active and aggressive process of formal and textual infiltration.

Other graphic operations work to secure and orient the spectacle. The late night news show NEWS 13 follows the film and immediately responds to it with a graphic/verbal sequence thick in image and sound. The first shot in the sequence captures a freeze frame graphic of Noriega taken during his arrest and incarceration. The image is presented to viewers as a "mug shot" (fig. 8). Broadcasters add colored video borders to either side of this televised "photograph." The title "TV-13" is visually keyed into the mug shot in the lower left corner of the frame. By doing this, Channel 13 in effect takes visual possession of the "real" Noriega for its programming purposes, much in the same way that it earlier appropriated the "fictional" SALVADOR. The pictorial convention of the police mug shot carries with it a heightened impression of the real. The visual conventions of the date, frame and wall suggest that Noriega here functions as a hunting trophy. In these ways, graphic appropriation bestows upon KCOP more authority, skill, and ownership.

While critics of broadcast journalism frequently attack television's penchant for decontextualizing interviews into sound "bites" and for simplifying complex stories, little has been done to explain the way that the news appropriates and manipulates "visual" bites. For example, what does it mean symbolically to imprint the *local* station ID over an *international* figure like Noriega? Appropriating and fabricating a sign in this way does several things. It suggests that the station now owns the story and also controls the figure's persona for its own ends. Both effects help legitimize the station's angle and coverage of the event. Certainly this kind of keying, framing, and bordering represent forms of *claim-making*. Televisual claim-making devices like these announce to viewers that a "special" relation exists between station and story.

#### VIDEO IMAGES / INTO FILM / INTO BROADCAST VIDEO IMAGES: (BORDER BLURRING / BLURRING BORDERS)

Increasingly, both television and film today use visual imagery borrowed from each other. From music videos to commercial spots, filmed images of scan lines, video

pixels, and videotape shuttle effects frequently become mixed with cinematic images. This tendency suggests that television and film viewers apparently understand media-specific production elements and technology-dependent production styles. SALVADOR also exploits a consciousness about distinct film and video "looks." During the film's broadcast, the station airs a "newsbreak." The voice of Madison Avenue commercials is thus briefly set aside for that of history and "reality." After the break, the station chooses to "return" to the film by fading up not on an image of cinematic spectacle but on a "videotaped" scene from within Stone's original film. Both the placement of this video footage within the original film, and its selection and isolation by broadcasters as a *lead-in* to the next segment of the film are significant. The transition back into the film could have happened at almost any scene in the film, but the broadcasters chose to link their video imagery with video footage from the film. The net result disguises the transition between media.

This hybridizing strategy exemplifies a process by which stations strategically reposition film footage during adaptation. They do this so as to blur and camouflage distinctions between program and program breaks; between filmed and televised material; between present and past. The television viewer has just seen a long sequence of station materials and ads and then sees a "televised" head shot of President Reagan on videotape. The source of the footage is obvious. This is archival "news" footage of the "real" Reagan. However, it has undergone a "double appropriation." First, Stone's original film utilizes the video footage in order to contextualize and legitimize the film's fiction. Secondly, television isolates and utilizes the same scene to further deteriorate distinctions between television station and television text. The footage's ontological status is ambiguous to viewers since

- (1) it is television footage,
- (2) that has been filmed on motion picture stock, and
- (3) that is subsequently re-broadcast on television. This footage carries the aura of presentness and the kind of direct address that one associates with video news. Such traits are also noticeably present in the broadcast newsbreak and anchor that directly precede the cinematic news scene. Because of this, the broadcast newsbreak also manages to take on and exude the epic proportions of the cinematic context from which it comes.

There is, then, a double appropriation. Stone strips the credibility and urgency signified by video for his own diegetic ends. KCOP in turn strips off the film's epic pretense in order to validate and bolster its own speaking position. The formal process goes through three stages, television-to-film-to-television. This double appropriation offers a clear example of one way in which the televisual text "spreads out." The program spreads into program break, and the break spreads into program. The textual ambiguity that results from this "spreading out" helps create a context essential for effective broadcast adaptation. In short, by leveling categorical distinctions that exist in the source film, televisual adaptation can better "re-animate" and "resuscitate" the older text for its own ends. Textual spreading and ambiguity mean, in effect, that the source material no longer stands as the master of its meaning. Furthermore, this leveling and reanimation process uses televised political footage, footage that we associate with history, to realize its

ends. The actual verbal content of the doubly transformed footage is Reagan articulating xenophobia about communist hordes "on the banks of the Rio Grande." And that comment raises issues to which I will return later, for it implicates another important televisual operation.

#### BOXED ENDTITLES JOINED WITH NEWS ANCHOR

Blurred media boundaries and textual ambiguity create a general context from which hybridization can take place. The source film used historical footage from television to give itself currency. Broadcast adaptation utilizes a counteracting process. Other televisual operations, however, are less passive in the way they "work over" source material. For instance, broadcast news forms constantly work to mirror or infiltrate the fiction of the film — either by narrative analogy, specific reference, or hybrid televisual forms. Chief among the latter category of hybrid visual forms is the use of a "picture album" style graphic box, typically inserted over the film's end-titles. This device brings the broadcasting station "into" the film before the movie is "completed." As the end-titles roll and the theme song plays, the female news anchor from the upcoming 10 O'CLOCK NEWS show, previews the coming programming around three points. From a graphic box on the right half of the image, set back from the screen at a 45 degree angle, she comments: "Up next on News 13: We'll tell you how a suicide and a new suspect may help solve a headline making murder. Consumer reporter Ken Daly tells you about the "best buys in tiny TVs." Also, "...a surprising change in...child support."

After these three stories are previewed, the graphic picture box rotates back toward the picture plane, and the end-titles and theme music continue without further displacement. Apart from giving a general sense that television has encroached upon the fictional world, this operation suggests two specific effects. First, the anchor appears over the graphic field while the swelling and tragic orchestral score continues underneath. As a result of this fluid operation, the anchor woman's place and import become heightened to epic and tragic proportions. She appropriates the film's rich connotations of history, tragedy, and passion for her own ends. Her news discourse gives to itself the kind of earth-shattering import that viewers confronted during the previous two hours.

Whereas music conventionally functions as an emotive or editorial device that "comments" on the film/video program, in this case reality/news seems to editorialize and comment on the music. The anchor's presence becomes literally imaged- and voiced-over the film's footage and soundtrack. By forcibly infiltrating and unseating the signified of the film music in this way, the anchor's presence allows itself to become the new target and referent of musical connotation. Formal devices within the film then, like music and titles, are fair game for appropriation by television in its repertoire of adaptation.

#### SPLITTING VIDEO AND AUDIO TRACKS IN ABRIDGMENT

Another, less obvious but pervasive form of stylistic revision involves the electronic "splitting" of audio and video tracks in post-production. Splitting is typically used to conceal elision. Several of the source film scenes have major portions deleted in broadcast adaptation but through splitting, retain a sense of continuity. Given the fact that a great deal of dialogue is lost in these sections, the way that continuity is maintained is worth noting. In one scene of the film, the character Boyle seeks

identification papers for his Salvadoran woman-friend by offering U.S. advisors secret photographs of leftist weapons.

Most of the original scene is deleted for broadcast. On the last line of common dialogue that occurs in both the film and televised version, the broadcast splits or separates sync audio from picture. For broadcast, the picture corresponding to the original sync statement disappears. Now the line of dialogue functions as a "bridge" for use at the end of the revised and greatly shortened scene. This split-off line of dialogue becomes "laid over" a completely different reaction shot of Boyle at the table.

As a result of this operation, Boyle's image no longer appears in its original shot-reverse-shot sequence, a sequence that had focused on heated political dialogue. Boyle's new image becomes instead an emotive "reaction shot," and the scene is re-defined in an explicitly psychological, rather than political, way. The scene, in its split and abridged form, now singularly and primarily deals with Boyle and his woman friend.

The simple operation of splitting off and later reusing existing dialogue as a voice-over bridge redefines visual images, but not in a syntagmatic or Kuleshovian way. It redefines instead by using new and simultaneous sound-image relations. Unlike censorship and automatic dialogue replacement (operations that typically flag themselves by mismatches in audio presence), the technique of splitting tracks results in a less obvious hybridizing operation. With splitting and bridging, the original audio presence or audio ambience in the scene remains. The film may include the same images and sounds but now in different relations. As a result, a film's meanings are volatile and prone to change. Here, in the same scene, a discourse about Latin American military involvement is transformed into a portrayal of "lost love."

## NEWS PREVIEWS

One of the most overt and persistent stylistic devices that infiltrates the film is the practice of previewing the "upcoming news." Constant news previews keep the issue of historical consequence on the viewing agenda. Again and again, the fictional world is halted, set aside, and frozen while television shifts its discourse to the "reality" of ads and news. Within the televisual flow of a feature film, newsbreaks assume an attitude that is both catchy and exaggerated. With only a few seconds to "hook" viewers, news breaks typically start with an interview quote or sound bite presented out of context. The break then states the challenge or premise that the news staff will tackle that evening, and then the anchor gives a "just plain folks" appeal and invitation to watch. Prominently displayed in newsbreaks during this broadcast is a tide graphic that repeats visually the same ponderous statement that the viewer hears on the soundtrack. In image and sound, this evening's newsbreak earnestly asks the following question: "Can Noriega get a fair trial?"

News previews are structured by their temporal proximity and sequential relation to important elements of the televised film. The first segment of a film (or "Act I" in a classical dramaturgical sense) typically aims to set up a dramatic fiction by presenting the story's chief or underlying problem or conflict.[9] In the case of SALVADOR, the violent and confusing first act of the film seems to ask, "What in

the hell is going on in this Central American horror?"

Television "answers" the film's dramatic hook and premise with a matter-of-fact news preview that questions whether Noriega can get a "fair trial." It is a commonplace of narrative theory that narrative discourse depends upon cause and effect relations. Elements in the story world, even fragmented and apparently discontinuous ones, are made "causal by the viewer's narrativitous countertendencies."<sup>[10]</sup>

Here, through televisual segmentation and through juxtaposition, the film's overarching dramatic premise or question is narratively answered by the news. That is, IF war in Central America *is* a nightmare, THEN (Can there be) "a fair trial for Noriega." Though both the film about El [LINE MISSING IN ORIGINAL] raphy of Central America, the cause-and-effect relation between the scenes is absolutely artificial and textual.

Such a process uses fiction to set up, heighten, and enhance the vantage from which television sees and the authority by which television speaks. To a fictional world which provides no answer, television promises one. The issues of violence and war are tough and pressing. Yet the televisual response is polite, authoritative and helpful. The anchor smiles to the viewer and says "hello."

Other breaks continue the cause and effect pattern. In another instance, the break again raises the specter of Noriega as the issue by which the film's dramatized musings on Central America will be "solved." The fourth major station break includes a newsbreak that includes the following three items:

- (1) "General Manuel Noriega faces the bench of justice in Miami..."
- (2) "Lunch at a restaurant in the Crenshaw district, ends in a hail of bullets," "And then..."
- (3) "Prostitutes and the spread of AIDS."

In this preview, the station again leads with the Noriega political "problem" and the news editor's narrative "answer." Notice the additional rhetorical "mileage" the station gets in its juxtaposition of film fiction, news, and local reality. The urgency of the Central American viewing agenda spreads out and affects other items on the news agenda. A hail of bullets in Los Angeles, and the issue of prostitutes and AIDS, the secondary stories, resonate by analogy to events in SALVADOR's fiction and Central America (e.g., urban gun battles, prostitution, and Noriega's "many women"). [11] Clearly, this sense of urgency permeates other items in the flow. Secondary stories become intertextually caught up in what appears to be a non-narrative flow. A sense of narrative causality results, however, through this kind of linkage and juxtaposition in news programming. Through this process, the station awards itself credibility. It does so by making more than just an overt link between the news' reality and the film's fiction. The station's own ostensibly tangential news agenda becomes recoded in an urgent narrative

PIGGYBACKED STUDIO PREVIEWS:  
STONE'S BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY

Broadcasters are not the only agents of appropriation. Little would be gained by blaming television as the culprit responsible for the degeneracy of "higher" texts or by suggesting that a conspiracy of misrepresentation defines television. In fact, the process of appropriation characterizes much in the mass media. With broadcast adaptation in particular, the dynamic of appropriation also includes textual forays and investments by Hollywood's feature film industry. Film previews on television offer financial rewards to owners and marketers of past films. Contemporary trailers can, in fact, re-value "dated" films that are textually linked to those trailers in broadcast. The following sequence aptly demonstrates how the inertia of contemporary promotion can re-value and resuscitate dated films and dead texts.

In a preview for the feature *BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY*, graphic subtitles boldly announce the film's nomination for many awards including "Best Director, Oliver Stone." In shot 1 of the preview, the U.S. flag is superimposed over Cruise's face, and in shot 2, we see a news clip of Cruise stating, "People say if you don't love America then get the hell out. Well, I love America?"

While the videocassette of the feature *SALVADOR* is still in circulation, its theatrical run is many years over. Studios can still make money on the past film, however, through a retroactive process of transference. (fig. 21) They can market not just a film but also a director's reputation and body of works. For the price of a 30 second spot on KCOP-13, the film studio gets two hours of viewer experience *defined as coming from Oliver Stone*. The preview makes the viewer conscious of an Oliver Stone "package" of works that now includes the headlining star Tom Cruise. Whereas the programming of *SALVADOR* clearly referred to current events in Central America, it also referred to the release of Stone's new film, *BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY*. The latter film had become a media event by January of 1990. Images or sounds of Stone, Cruise, Kovic, or clips of the film appeared in almost every venue of the mass media that covered the entertainment industry.

Reminiscent of the way that Universal shielded itself from critics of the *LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST* — by marketing it as Martin Scorsese's "personal artistic expression" — *BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY* was pitched to the public as a true and personal story from Stone and Kovic. A composite image focused on the highly intense eyes of Stone-Kovic-Cruise, witnessing war's horror.. January's broadcasting "event" of the film *SALVADOR* clearly paled beside the simultaneous national promotion and release of *BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY*. Nevertheless, *SALVADOR*'s broadcast adaptation afforded the producers a timely opportunity and site for marketing the later film.

A connection and similarity between the two films exists at more than the level of plot and scenario, although both works deal with "one man's journey through a violent hell and back" The films also share a similar, explicitly stated ideology. Promotional and on-air quotes by the marketers and promoters of the later film, however, went to extremes to contextualize its fundamentally anti-governmental stance as actually pro-United States. This repatriating tactic did not just depend upon having the characters of James Woods and Tom Cruise assert their patriotism within each film, although both do. Instead, televisual repatriation was also done in the context of politics outside of the film and broadcast. By January Kovic was being touted as the next important candidate of the Democratic Party in Southern California, while the Republican bastion that dominated Orange County

attacked both Kovic and Stone's left-leaning liberalism. Published statements ripped Stone and his liberal boys from Hollywood. Given the possibility that the FOURTH OF JULY film might propel Kovic or Stone, or both, into office, arch-conservative U. S. Representative Robert Dornan dared Kovic and Stone to take on the Republicans:

"Kovic is going to have to defend the Hollywood far left. If he thinks he's going to recruit Oliver Stone and Top-Gun-turned malcontent Tom Cruise, and bring the whole Jane Fonda team down here to Orange County, I welcome it. Let's go." (*Los Angeles Times*, 5/1/1990)

The mass marketing of U.S. films depends upon an ideology of universal appeal. Probably because of this, marketing rhetoric effaces and neuters the obvious anti-status quo stance of both films. Both characters, Boyle and Kovic, are interpreted as having "loved" and sacrificed for their countries. Both films are presented as autobiographical and personal. Consider the strange and striking similarities between the following three "patriotic" public statements, all collaged together in this same broadcast event:

"Well, I love America..." — Tom Cruise, in film trailer.

"I believed in America..." — Dialogue from Stone's SALVADOR.

"Many Thanks, America" — Placard held by grateful Panamanian citizen thanking U.S. military for invading her country.

From such combinations, one might suspect that the Stone-Kovic-Cruise-Boyle persona had snowballed to hemispheric proportions, and was now also shared by the Panamanian citizenry. In this light, the plug for the more recent Stone movie during the hybridized broadcast of SALVADOR actually worked to stress not both films' anti-heroism but a corporate ideology of weathered and *sacrificial patriotism*.

Notice that while the main thrust of the programming related SALVADOR to Noriega and Panama, this secondary connection invoked a different kind of history, a biographical history. Personal histories effectively market the present by referring to the past, as BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY did by reference to SALVADOR; as Stone did by reference to Kovic; as the studios did by reference to Stone. Invoking the history of director Stone establishes the validity of both film accounts. Whereas television news appropriated the fiction to insure its own aura of urgency and import. Hollywood appropriated and infiltrated the same fiction to legitimize its current aesthetic and economic programme. This televisual text, then, is clearly open and receptive to appropriation on various fronts.

#### PIGGYBACKED PREVIEWS FOR OTHER TELEVISED MOVIES: *THE BORDER*

In addition to promos for the film being televised, and to previews within the broadcast for other features, the televised SALVADOR also included station promos for subsequent film broadcasts. The short promotional spot for THE BORDER, slated for broadcast two days later on KCOP-13 is particularly instructive. Short and to the point, the promo for THE BORDER occurs as the 9th non-program item, exactly halfway through the 2nd television break. The ad

presents a pressing voice-over appeal to the viewer:

"Saturday night at 5, personal problems force a border patrol officer to risk his career — and his life, in the exploitation of illegal Mexican immigrants. Jack Nicholson stars in the action-adventure THE BORDER."

If one were to substitute the following words, the synopsis would apply as easily to SALVADOR's televised presentation — which contained THE BORDER promo.

"Personal problems force a *photographer* to risk his career — and his life, in the exploitation of illegal *Salvadoran* immigrants."

The border, exploitation, and immigrants, all function as overt themes in SALVADOR. Programming makes broadcasts congruent based on perceived similarities of plot and point of view. Significantly, the promo refers to the film as an "action-adventure" genre picture. Both by personalizing the story and by the self-conscious application of a genre category, television mediates and distances SALVADOR (even more so than THE BORDER) from its aggressive political critique. The promotional language of the televisual text effaces politics and asks viewers to see such films as dramatized personal problems. I will show later that this hybridizing dialectic between the personal and the political also helps shape the program's various operations of elision.

#### BREAKS: SEGMENTATION AND CONTINUITY

Other additive elements are less obvious than promos in their reference to the televised film. Chief among these apparently obligatory additions to the broadcast are the large number of ads within the televised text. While Raymond Williams referred to television advertising as part of the "flow" of programming, later theorists like Browne and others have embraced the idea that this infusion and expansion of the text creates a kind of "super-text." This academic vision of television as an expansive and unifying text contrasts with the industry's own explicit view of such ads as part of "program breaks" — that is, the material in between the show. Although critical theorists like Modleski[12] have clearly shown that a symbiotic relationship exists between ads and program, industry writers still conceptualize their task as basically intra-textual, as concerned with the narrative as a unit. An analysis of the first programming break in SALVADOR reveals some interesting and overt linkages between program and non-program material.

Of the commercial ads sold here the majority focused on domestic and hygienic goods and products. Of 11 ads, the four that appear during the first half of the break are broad in their address and appeal both to female and male consumers. These ads sell a variety of goods (food, audio tape, a charge card, snack cakes, and Italian sausage). During the second half of the break, the implied viewer is also broad-based (underwear, food products, cold medicine), although more of these ads clearly appeal to female consumers (feminine douche, finesse hairspray, etc.). Such ads do not have the clearly male focus one might expect to find supporting a violent boy-action picture like SALVADOR. The ads' emphasis on the familial, domestic, and hygienic (middle-class) goods and services may provide a key to the kinds of revisions that go on in the televised version of the film. The film SALVADOR explicitly attacks middle-class mores, decorum, manners, restraint, morality,

cleanliness, and women in general. Yet the ads suggest that the televised version of the film is aimed precisely at an audience defined by those waists. The elided aspects of the film, in fact, are these most repugnant to the sanitized world depicted and idealized by the ads. When Doc is at his physically lowest, he is covered with filth and has amoebic dysentery and several sexually transmitted diseases. He steals food from a stranger's plate, then verbally erupts at Boyle:

"I'm stuck in the middle of this fucking country. I can't speak the language. I got the shits, and I only got 3 fucking dollars... I gotta get outta here, man..."

The downward trajectory of these characters toward amoral anarchy, is clearly at odds with the upbeat world of bodily and familial maintenance suggested by the ads. Flitterman and others have referred to the complementary relation between ads and program as resulting from a need to address and exploit the viewer's daily schedule and viewing habits.[13] In the case of daytime soaps, the continual lack of textual closure is solved in the falsely resolved world of the ads. For the daytime viewer, ads artificially pose a congruent relation between the world of soaps and the world of the homemaker. A different kind of viewing habit is implied by this broadcast, however. The cinematic fiction in *SALVADOR*, by contrast, signals its extreme dissimilarity to, and utter disregard for, the viewer's world. The net effect of the *film* text is less one of irresolution than of perpetual *estrangement*. As film, *SALVADOR* achieves its effect by alienating its characters from their increasingly bizarre surroundings. The viewer of the film has a similarly bizarre experience, since the film depicts the Central American physical and bodily "horrors" as absolutely alien to the North American suburban culture associated with mass market television.

Broadcast adaptation confronts *SALVADOR*'s tactic of cinematic estrangement head-on. Whereas the original *film* exploits viewers' anxiety through extreme dissimilarity and dissonance, the interjected *television* station material does just the opposite. Added broadcast material tends to work by constant *analogy* to the film spectacle. It fills the emotional void caused by the film's acts of estrangement. It soothes and mediates the dissonance between the viewer's world and the world of the filmic spectacle. Broadcasting offers itself as the known and knowing agent capable of contextualizing and explaining the cinematic and political abyss. It continually broaches and barters connections to other programming forms in a process that directly promotes the station's other offerings. In fact, the site of televisual adaptation is a marketplace. The televised "film" is a product that is stylistically drawn, quartered and packaged under many different labels. A close analysis of *SALVADOR* suggests that the stylistic repackaging of the film works to make its cinematic spectacle more palatable and more universal. Feature films, it seems, are forever open to redefinition. Historical events change the viewer's agenda and expectations. In this particular ease, the visual spectacle of *estrangement* in the *film* *SALVADOR* actually intensifies the sense of *congruence* and comfort offered by broadcasting and televisual spectacle.

#### ELISION: GEOGRAPHICAL RELATIONS / TRANSIT

My primary interest here has been to examine formal encroachments that "add" to the adapted film text, but even "subtractive" or elided material re-constructs a new text for broadcast. Along with its general strategy of deleting personal,

biographical, and causal motivations from character, the broadcast film consistently deletes all transit sequences. Any clear sense of geography for the viewer is lost as well. One of the earliest and most obvious elisions of film material that depicts travel and geography is the sequence dramatizing Boyle and Doc's down-and-out drive from California to Central America. In the original film version, 14 shots comprise the montage sequence and show the characters on their way to El Salvador. In the television version, however, the characters make this 2400+ mile journey in a total of three shots that last a matter of seconds. The car in each shot suggests a continuity of action. Time and space are filmically, massively condensed. Dialogue occurs entirely in voice over, the soundtrack is pop, and the few surviving shots are stitched together with video dissolves. A close analysis of this "problematic" transit scene is instructive. This massive geographical ellipsis, typifies a kind of narrative condensation pervasive in the first half of the film.

From a couple of traveling shots in the opening of the montage, filmed clearly in the deserts of Southern California, the television viewer immediately confronts a mileage sign in El Salvador itself. One wonders whether this televisual ellipsis (through video dissolve) implies that the men are traveling to "Santa Ana" in suburban Los Angeles rather than to a city in Central America. In any case, the net effect implies that the land where "they kill people" is actually just on our doorstep.

This hybrid montage visually creates and suggests geographical threat and xenophobia. The program repeats the threat explicitly two other times. News footage in the film of Ronald Reagan warns that the spread of Communism in Latin American will soon threaten "North America." Later, a U.S. embassy military advisor baits Boyle by suggesting the specter of "Cuban tanks on the Rio Grande." This isolationist model of fortress United States, threatened by communist conspiracy and the influx of illegal aliens, provided a common theme in U.S. mass media during the decade of the 1980s. Here, in the interest of narrative expediency, the mythology becomes perpetuated through televisual shorthand. Whereas the narrative "cause" of the characters' trip is shown through a series of dramatized personal rejections, the narrative "effect" is to step next door into the kind of hell known as El Salvador.

Personal rejection, a car, a border mileage sign to San Salvador and Santa Ana. This is the symbolic route that television viewers travel in order to *play* the new narrative. Unlike the film's car trip, the televisual route is efficient, visual, depersonalized. Boyle's personal history is completely removed as a justification for the sequence. The textual vacuum created by this elision is filled by a mere transition. The original narrative flow, then, is subverted. The television program creates an artificial causality (and space) between the surviving visual and textual elements.

#### PROGRAMMED CONFUSION: THE SPECTACULAR OTHER

I began this article by reference to several broadcast incidents that betray television's appetite for shifts between history and fiction. I will end it by citing two additional examples that suggest the *ideological* stakes involved in this process of encroachment and resuscitation. On January 12, 1990, a KNBC Television correspondent covered the inauguration of Chile's newly elected government, and described Vice-President Quayle's participation in the event. Not once but twice the reporter mistakenly referred to Quayle as meeting with "Noriega" (the deposed

president of Panama) rather than with his actual contact, Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua. Although the two men's political positions could not have been more different, the names were apparently interchangeable to the news staff and editors. No retraction occurred in the news show that followed. Two months later, as the new government of Violeta Chamorra was being installed in Nicaragua, U.S. stations (and even local affiliates) sent their various headlining correspondents to cover the occasion and boost ratings. An on-air phone-in report by ABC commentator Bruce Herschenson from Nicaragua detailed the changing situation in Managua. After an extended discussion with Herchenson, perplexed studio anchor Paul Moyers asked, "Are you in El Salvador?" Herschenson responded, "No, Nicaragua" Only slightly less ambivalent, Moyers concluded, "You're in Nicaragua?"[14]

Countries, nationalities, leaders, political affiliation—all apparently are interchangeable when it comes to the worldly spectacle "out there." By leveling particulars and partisanship, televisuality makes the global spectacle open to infinite appropriation. I am suggesting that the process of appropriation and resuscitation does not just function as an artistic transformation that targets and revalues dated Hollywood products like SALVADOR. The constant unfolding and decontextualization of current historical events on television provides an ample resource, an excuse, for animating any dead cultural text. Through stylistic encroachment, televisuality adapts and hybridizes existing texts in a way that makes them acutely open to political appropriation. History/Text, News/Film, Reality/Fiction. In broadcast adaptation, these dialectical terms are used as currency in the televisual system of exchange. Yes, war makes good television, even as it remakes dead fictions.[15]

## NOTES

1. A good example that combines various accounts critical of Gulf War "coverage," balance and objectivity is "Screening the War. Filmmakers and Critics on the Images that Made History," *International Documentary* (Spring, 1991): 20-25. The analyses make no reference to the war's ideological effects on programming outside of the coverage itself.
2. I am drawing especially on the work of Mimi White, who in "Television: A Narrative, A History," *Cultural Studies* (1990): 282-300, describes the important process by which television both "produces" and "disperses" the idea of history.
3. See my *Televisuality: The Emergence and Performance of Visual Style in American Television* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993).
4. Although it is likely, due to the lead time needed to schedule features on television, that SALVADOR was programmed in response to the December 1989 guerrilla uprising in Salvador (an event that only a few weeks before, shocked westerner "experts" by its ferocity), the actual week of the broadcast clearly placed the fiction within the context of the war in Panama.
5. CAMARENA followed weeks of promos that preceded it by proclaiming "Long before Noriega..." NBC, by the time it promoted the mini-series, apparently saw Noriega as the master paradigm for theft docu-fiction. Or at least the Camerena story became interchangeable with the Noriega story. To underline the extent and

acceptance of this conflation of fact with fiction, the Mexican government responded to an NBC news special on corruption with adamant protests. To them, both Tom Brokaw's special, and the Camarena mini-series, to which it was overtly linked and programmed, in addition to its racism, unfairly indicted and linked the Mexican government with Latin drug corruption.

6. Operations which originate in "Standards and Practices" departments and involve the replacement of dialogue in video postproduction usually takes the form of "post-dubbing" or "automatic dialogue replacement," whereby narration is recorded later and inserted into the original audio mix to replace questionable language. The technical quality that results varies, and differences in ambient noise usually signals to an astute viewer that dialogue has been replaced. This type of substitution is widespread and can be accompanied by warnings that televised material is of an adult nature or that it is not for sensitive viewers. Since censorship-based ADR is acknowledged self-consciously by the industry, it lacks the apparent arbitrariness of many of the other, less obvious, hybridizing televisual operations that I focus on here.

7. SALVADOR includes the use of numerous clips and "actuality images" normally associated with fact, documentary and reportage — maps, tides, newsreel, and video footage — all examples of televisual language utilized within the film production itself.

8. I am referring here to Nick Browne's concept of the "super-text" as described in 'The Political Economy of The Television (Super)Text', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 1984, and to Raymond William influential notion of the broadcast "flow" described in *Television, Technology, and Cultural Form* (New York Schocken, 1974).

9. This widespread view of narrative structure is found in many popular and "how-to" works on screenwriting and film, including Syd Field, *The Art of Screenwriting* (New York: Dell, 1979).

10. Robert Scholes' view of "narrativitous counter-tendencies" is described in, "Narration and Narrativity in Film," *Film Theory and Criticism*, Mast and Cohen (eds.), (New York: Oxford Press, 1985), 390-403.

11. The line referring to his "many women" was used both by the mass media in reference to Noriega's lifestyle and as a condemnation by Maria of Boyle's lifestyle in the film SALVADOR.

12. Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance* (New York: Methuen, 1982).

13. See especially Sandy Flitterman, "The Real Soap Operas," *Regarding Television* (Los Angeles: AFI, 1983), 84-96.

14. As reported in the *Los Angeles Times*, Friday 27 April, 1990. By June 1992 "reporter" Herschenson was the far-right Republican candidate for the California U. S. Senate seat. So much for journalism's celebration of neutrality.

15. I would like to thank the Scholarly and Creative Activities Committee, the Office of Research and the California State University, Long Beach for providing the time

necessary to complete this research.

---

[To top](#)   [Current issue](#)   [Archived essays](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)

# *Salaam Bombay!* (Mis)representing child labor

by Jyotika Virdi

from *Jump Cut*, no. 37, July 1992, pp. 29-36

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1992, 2006

SALAAM BOMBAY! marks a departure from the powerful and one-sided flow of media texts from the "First" to the "Third World." As a film from "Other Worlds," to borrow a term from Gayatri Spivak, SALAAM BOMBAY is made by Mira Nair, an Indian filmmaker, a woman of color. Its warm reception by western audiences is an encouraging sign, since despite India's large film industry, few Indian films reach a western audience. Films about India that do reach the west have been made by westerners presenting their view of the Orient. These films are representations of the Other rather than self-representations from "Other Worlds." However, I wish to question how much indigenous authorship — as in the case of SALAAM BOMBAY! — amounts to a more "authentic" representation of the "Other World."

I think that to receive the film SALAAM BOMBAY! as a film from "Other Worlds" raises complex issues about representational politics, which arise out of India's complicated colonial history. Who makes the film? For whom? And how does it shape what is said? In other words, the film's textual politics can only be analyzed by posing these kind of rhetorical questions. In this paper I will analyze SALAAM BOMBAY! in terms of its politics of production and politics of reception, which I see as tied to its textual politics. By politics of production I mean to locate the subject-position of the filmmaker, which is constituted by a specific colonial history. I will examine this film's reception at two levels: first, how the content of the film text shapes its reception; and second, the position the text occupies in western film and tele-visual space. In particular, I will look at the film's reception in the grounds of the "First World" and the representation of "Other Worlds" within it.

The reason for tying the textual politics of the film to the politics of reception has to do with the nature of my own engagement with the film. I wish to present my own subject-position vis-à-vis the text and the audience. Having seen the film advertised as a "docudrama" about the street children of Bombay, played by those actually engaged in child labor, and having grown up in India and thus familiar with this scenario, I was disappointed by the film. Its overwhelming success with western audiences motivated me to try to understand their response. I showed the film to U. S. university students, and I will report their responses along with my analysis. As I do this, I am fully cognizant of the problems involved in my

privileged position as a media critic representing the audiences' reaction through the movement I make between audience response and the film text. My intention here is to highlight some features of the overwhelmingly positive response to the film and to point out how the film text shapes this.

The film SALAAM BOMBAY! traces the story of Krishna, a boy, about twelve years old. Abandoned by a circus company that he works for, Krishna buys a ticket to Bombay. We are told in a conversation he has with another child that he left home because of a family feud and needs to raise Rs 500 (approximately the monthly wage of an unskilled worker) before he can go home. Working at a local tea shop that services a neighborhood brothel and befriended by a street-adolescent, Chillum, who sells drugs, Krishna encounters the underworld of a "Third World" metropolis. Several parallel stories are woven into the plot: one revolves around "Sweet Sixteen," a young girl from Nepal kept hostage at the brothel, a victim of the traffic in women; a second story deals with another prostitute in the brothel, a single mother, in love with a local drug pusher and struggling to raise her five year old daughter, Manju; a third story is about Krishna's friend Chillum and his addiction to "brown sugar."

I will report what appealed to the university students to whom I showed the film and interviewed after the screening. The film was received with unanimous and unambiguous praise by members of the audience. Identification with Krishna was ubiquitous: "He was so good...so responsible." The fact that Krishna was not rough or hardened by his circumstances made him all the more appealing: "He did not do drugs...He worked hard to earn his money...He 'looked' his role." This latter point seemed sufficient to establish his credibility. The film evoked maximum involvement in the narrative line — the characters, the plot, what happened to whom, the personal relations between the children, the nameless prostitute and her relationship with her daughter. University students seemed enormously satisfied with the narratives about the various characters, the characters' actions and whether or not they were justified. This is how the "magic of realism" seems to work. The film can be accepted and appreciated as a powerful rendition of the manifest reality of the "Other World" it portrays.

For this reason I argue that it could be a story of pathos situated anywhere in the world. Aside from the trappings of language, idiom and locale, I do not see the nexus of drugs, poverty, and prostitution in the Bombay underworld as being in any way a particularized representation of a metropolis in India. I am unable to see how this story would be different if set in Dickens' nineteenth century England or a contemporary New York City or Chicago.

When I probed the students about what the film told them about a world they knew nothing about, they did have questions: "Do all parents abandon their children? Does the state take away children from their parents?" they asked. Interestingly SALAAM BOMBAY! resembles the clichéd genre of commercials that people are familiar with on U.S. television which solicit good-hearted North Americans to donate their dollars to adopt/support children in a "Third World" country. It is not the film's appeal to emotions that I consider problematic. It is the glaring omission of the specificity of the situation which Nair attempts to delineate. In particular, the film omits issues concerning child labor and rural displacement.

I asked about the student's reactions to child labor. One student was shocked to see

young children working. Another student felt the children were lucky to have jobs to support themselves. At any rate the scarcity of jobs at a living wage did not seem to be an issue. Yet another student commented that children's having jobs was offered as background information about the characters, but of itself it did not seem important. Nair's own motivation for making the film, the starting point of it all, was her experience of seeing children selling newspapers while stopping at a red light when she rode in a taxi in Bombay. The children were weaving dangerously between the cars, imploring people like herself to buy newspapers. Since child labor is rampant in India, its presence inescapable even to the casual tourist, it is surprising how much Nair elides the issue. However, "You cannot show everything," a member of the audience argued with me.

The displacement of the children from their rural homes to the back alleys of Bombay does surface in *SALAAM BOMBAY!* Within the narrative economy of the film, family feuds are invoked as the cause of this displacement. Here was a moment in the film where a narrative cause-effect connection, used repeatedly, could have been mobilized to explore deeper connections between social institutions and their effects on peoples' lives. The actual cause of displacement is set in motion by dispossession of land — that oldest modern tragedy of capitalism, the rise of rural unemployment, and the subsequent migration to the city in search of jobs. The film completely represses these casual connections in the same way it does the issues surrounding child labor.

Had Nair chosen a more analytic direction, she would have avoided the rather specious representation of children abandoned by their parents and living like orphans. A picture closer to reality would depict parents who do not abandon children but rather who view children as an asset to the family and their labor an essential contribution to family income. Specifically this rural migrant family custom gets transposed onto urban capitalist relations, making children a source of cheap and easily exploited labor in the city. Impoverished rural migrant families do not see educating their children as an avenue for achieving upward mobility. Energy is directed towards mere survival.

What is worse is that the narrative gives rise to a complete misperception of the problem. The film presents the problem of families abandoning children, on the one hand, and of the state, on the other hand, making authoritarian interventions in family life by taking away children from "dysfunctional" families. This is a familiar scenario to the western audience and is read into the Indian context. It is perhaps farthest from the heart of the problems confronting street children in India. Nair's plot line, while it succeeds in maintaining narrative momentum, fails because it ends up with a merely symptomatic reading of poverty and despair.

Thus in a sequence towards the end of the film, Manju (the prostitute's daughter) and Krishna get picked up by the police and thrown into a state detention center. Manju gets taken away from the prostitute (against her mother's wishes) and loses her family just like Krishna already has, although for different reasons. This loss of family that the film repeatedly points to is incredible, especially when matched against social reality. State institutions are strained and overcrowded not because they actively round up children on the streets but because these repressive, reformist institutions, whether philanthropic or penal, are always underbudgeted, underpaid and understaffed. The sequence that follows Krishna's escapades in the

state-run detention center appears to be added to reveal the dismal conditions of state institutions, which are suppose to function as an alternative to life on the streets for these children.

But here again, Nair merely skims the surface of another weighty issue ridden with complexities — the issue of minors, criminality, law, and repressive reform structures like "juvenile" detention centers. If the Indian state is to be faulted for its relation to children, it is not for its solicitous and paternalistic interventions in family matters but rather for its utter lack of concern about regulating large and small scale employers for their egregious violations of labor laws, exploitation of child-labor, and the failure to bring them to book for their widely known malfeasance in this area. SALAAM BOMBAY! indict both family and state for a callous attitude towards children, but the question remains, is that the crux of the problem of child labor?

The film depends on a traditional, overused, and generalized account of decadence, dislocation, the depravity of street life, the pathos of drug abuse, poverty and prostitution. In structuring the film around a brothel, and the lives of prostitutes and drug pushers, Nair exercises a choice, including plot lines about adults trapped by the manipulations of love/sex relations. The story of Baba, the drug pusher, and his relationship with Sweet Sixteen and the prostitute/single mother are narratives of victimization that guarantee audience interest and attention, since audiences always have an appetite for such stories. But such major inclusions are choices the filmmaker makes at the cost of excluding other aspects of the children's lives on the street which the film purports to address.

By locating the film in the setting of a brothel and by dealing with pushers and prostitutes, the film engages us with institutions that are largely tangential to the lives of "children on the street of Bombay," to whom the film is dedicated. As one student pointed out, child labor and the struggle for survival become background issues in the film. The struggle to find work, job conditions, extortion, underpayment and long hours of work that working children face are only faintly suggested in the film and for the most part remain peripheral. The film seems more about the life of children on the streets who make a quick buck by pushing drugs, enjoying long hours of leisure, gambling, drinking and taking buggy rides after they break into an old Parsee man's house.

There is too much that we do not know about the children shown sleeping in the streets. How do they organize to get food? Or water? Where do they bathe or take a shit? Many would argue that these are unnecessary and unpalatable details to add to a film. Who would want to see these children searching for food from garbage cans, bathing in ponds saturated with industrial effluents or using the railway tracks to take a shit? But such images are unpalatable precisely because the truth about the everyday lives in the street is grimmer and offers less titillation than do the travails of love among victims of prostitution.

The film offers a fable about poverty, a tale about the misery and suffering of the underclass with an overpowering sense of hopelessness. In this sense it is reminiscent of the Italian tradition of neorealism of the fifties, along with its use of location shooting and nonprofessional actors. De Sica's film BICYCLE THIEF (1948) is emblematic of this tradition. Like Ricci, the protagonist of De Sica's film, the boy Krishna tries hard, but circumstances constantly go against him. Krishna

suffers one reversal after another, losing his family, his "girl," his job, and the money he almost makes in order to go back to his village. The film leaves us with a merely sentimental account of the conditions of poverty and with pessimism about the victimization of the underclass. How class, status, literacy, child labor and exploitative labor practices impinge on each other is not presented. Instead what is deployed is a narrative structure that relies on a cause-effect formula sometimes used with little credibility.

For instance, the process of how Krishna becomes involved with a network of connections once in Bombay is not at all clear. When he arrives in the city, we are shown him meeting Chillum and other street-children by accidentally bumping into a garbage heap. Similarly Krishna and Manju's arrest appears to be staged merely for the film to make a hasty "*exposé*" of life inside a state-run "juvenile" institution. Krishna's "great escape" from the juvenile detention center happens in the most clichéd style: he jumps onto a pick-up truck that stands outside the forbidding walls of the juvenile home. This and the subsequent murder of Baba go against the grain of Krishna's character as it was etched out in the rest of the film: he had been shown as innocent and compassionate despite the most adverse circumstances in his environment.

There are moments in the film that can be read as moments of resistance. One such moment is a scene where a U.S. tourist bargains with Krishna and Chillum over the sale of cocaine. Interestingly, every one of my students responded positively to the tourist being "ripped off," though many who had traveled or had friends who had traveled had heard warnings against "scams" in "Third World" countries, which they were also aware were "cheap" places to visit. "He deserved it." "It was perfectly legitimate for the children to rip him off in order to survive." But the question is, is this really a "rip off"? If the U.S. tourist gone to another drug dealer, he may have got a better price and thus avoided being "ripped off." But compared to what he might pay in the U.S. is he being "ripped oft?"

In the ontology of the international fiscal system and badly skewed currency exchange rates in favor of the U.S. (currently at Rs 23 for a dollar), no matter what Krishna, Chillum or the audience believe, a North American tourist is never "ripped off." Yet here the audience experiences a comforting identification with the protagonists and a spurious sense of participating in a subversive act. They see the tourist's being "ripped off" as a symbolic victory for the "Third World," without recognizing the lopsided exchange rates that permit tourists to get fantastic bargains for whatever they buy, no matter what the cost. The audience's complicity in the children's condition is never brought to bear on the film. Poverty becomes just another commodity circulated for consumption within the cultural circuit.

Nair's own complicity and her inability to confront the relation between her aesthetic choices and her subject matter is also a serious issue. Film critic Rustom Bharucha accuses Nair of voyeurism, in which director and viewers are implicated. [1][[open notes in new window](#)] A case in point is a scene where the camera tracks past the red light area of Bombay from the "safe distance" of an invisible car — revealing the director's touristic engagement with the "material" for which she purports to have strong empathy. In an essay entitled 'Postmodernism and Feminism,' Craig Owens discusses Martha Rosler's photographic art, "The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems, 1972-74." Rosler intentionally avoids

photographing the inhabitants of Skid Row or speaking on theft behalf, while maintaining a "safe distance." Rosler has called this "victim photography," which is supported by the myth of "photographic transparency and objectivity." Craig argues that "victim photography" only acts

"as an agent of the system of power that silenced these people in the first place. Thus, they are twice victimized: first by society, and then by the photographer who presumes the right to speak on their behalf."<sup>[2]</sup>

The question that Craig raises involves much other politically motivated art practiced today: "the indignity of speaking for others."<sup>[3]</sup> The scene from SALAAM BOMBAY! described above engages in voyeurism from a safe distance so that the prostitutes of Bombay's famous Falkland street become "twice victims" — first by society and then by the gaze of the camera that absorbs theft images for free and then puts those images into a circuit of exchange, the profits of which never reach them.

How does one read a film funded by Rockefeller Foundation, Britain's Channel Four, France's Cadrage and India's own state-owned television, Doordarshan? It is a film made about the grimy poverty of Third World children and received warmly by the sensibilities of the First World. While examining the politics of production we cannot ignore the extensive extratextual material — full page interviews with the filmmaker in newspapers and magazines that give news about her "involvement" with the children she represented. The children she engaged in the film, we are told, did not return to their lives on the streets. They have been put on the right track, so to speak. They go to schools now (some we are told set up by Nair herself), or they are working at "decent" jobs. The *Sunday Boston Globe* reports:

"Five of the 17 have returned home to their villages. Others are in school. Others are pursuing work of *their choice*. Four work as messengers for film companies. One runs a gambling den. One of them now teaches sculpture to blind children in Bombay [italics mine]" (16 October 1988).

There are two ways of reading this. One is to dismiss this work as promoting at best reformist welfare or at worst old-fashioned charity. From this point of view such individual solutions fail to deal with the depth of the problem and are mere bandages that fail to make a dent on what is an immense problem of child labor in India. This critique is often made by leftwing radicals, who call instead for fundamental changes in social and economic organization and the distribution of resources, achievable only by the insurgency of the subaltern. The other approach made by proponents of those engaged in welfare is to dismiss this radical critique and its agenda by declaring its strategy to be an alibi for inaction. The waiting-for-the-revolution stance denies the value of compassion and the tangible service done is dismissed as humanism. While torn between these two arguments, I feel helped in making my own judgment by reading the extratextual evidence mentioned earlier. The repeated interviews in newspapers and news magazines reporting on Nair and her film have done much to publicize her humanism. What disconcerts me is the tenor of all these interviews, in which the filmmaker calls attention to her engagement and involvement with the children's lives, which one would have hoped the film would have dealt with in the first place. It is this self-absorbed, self-

congratulatory tone that permits me to slot Nair's work in the liberal reformist camp.

Nair claims that part of her objective was to instill in the children "a sense of self-worth and dignity." The imprint of U.S. popular psychology is inescapable in this statement. The entire post-Enlightenment era with its manifesto of the "rights of man" has propagated the notion of the individual, "his" worth, success and entrepreneurship. The idea of the individual in charge of his/her destiny denies the role of wider social and political forces. It speaks with the same ideology embedded in the voice of *The Sunday Boston Globe* reporter who writes about the children pursuing jobs of "their own choice." How does Nair hope to graft these notions onto children who labor for long hours of the day as rag-pickers,[4] restaurant assistants or as the docile work force for the piecework industrial system? It is not their choice to work at these jobs, nor is it simply a matter of dignity and self-worth that will help these children alter their lives or pull themselves up by their bootstraps, as the mythology[5] of Nair's speech indicates.

The aftermath of the lives of the children that Nair hand-picked from the streets for her film has been reported in *India Today*:

"Naidu, 17, went back to Nagpur and brought his long-estranged mother and sister to show them the sights of Bombay. Rashid, 15, has gone to Delhi to study and work with Barry John's theater workshop. Saifuddin, 12, used his earnings to get his family's legal possession of their house in a Bihar village. For Manoj, 15, the transformation in his life has been even more poignant. He had run away from his home in a Madhya Pradesh village two years ago as his father beat him for his obsession for sculpting ganesh *murtis*.[6] Today Manoj has a job teaching blind students to sculpt religious idols" (15 August 1988).

This is the reality of the children's lives. Yet *The Guardian* in an adulatory note on the film welcomed the film as a "breakthrough" in the west, "suddenly intriguing those who knew little or nothing about it."<sup>[7]</sup> Perhaps the film's success with the western audience lies precisely in the fact that they know nothing about India. The report goes on to tell us that for young Shafiq, who played Krishna, the main protagonist in the film, the pleasures of commercial cinema are lost forever: "All these films appear *naqli*[8] now. Real life is different." Ironically Shafiq's words could not be more appropriate for the film SALAAM BOMBAY!, in which he is supposed to have represented the lives of the likes of himself.

How then may we address the terminal problem of representation, especially when it comes to representing the Other? Speaking of the nature of intervention possible for the intellectual in the "texts of oppression," Spivak suggests the possibility of "[r]epresenting them and analyz[ing] them, disclosing one's own positionality for the communities in power."<sup>[9]</sup> A self-reflexive mandate is suggested. Dana Polan has attempted to address the problem of representation within the tradition of "realism" by invoking Bertold Brecht. Brecht defines realism as revealing a series of cause-effect relations, contrasting with the hegemonic view. He urges that realism in art be compared to the life depicted. Further, Brecht argues, the attitude of the viewing subject stems from the "attitudinal position in the work." What Brecht calls for in political art, says Polan, is to evoke pleasure in viewing which at the same time creates anger, sympathy, wisdom and respect. What is required is both

identification and a critical perspective — from which "the old way is scrutinized" and challenged.[10] Pleasure can be wrought from identification and self-reflexivity. Had Nair situated herself, her own relation to the children, the factors that made her relation and intervention possible and the areas where her access to their lives and situation was impossible due to her specific subject position, the film would have been built on a much more honest and open account.

What then is the role of the post-colonial intellectual as a "specific intellectual"? [11] Cornel West takes a sympathetic view of political artists representing those at the margins "the demoralized, demobilized, depoliticized, and disorganized people" hoping to enlist "collective insurgency." The "double-bind" these artists find themselves in is "simultaneously progressive and co-opted," since the very operation of their art reveals the power structure they are imbricated in: film funding sources, film festival networks, etc.[12]

Edward Säid asks the pertinent and uncomfortable question about the role of the intellectual in contemporary politics: "Who writes? For whom is the writing being done? In what circumstances?" Answers to these questions, he argues, should provide us with "ingredients for a politics of interpretation." His argument can well be extended to the gamut of cultural workers — filmmakers and artists, particularly those in the business of political, social or ethnographic documentaries. A useful method which Säid suggests is to understand the "audience," "constituency," "community," and "opponents" for whom this work is being produced. Writing, and I would add other cultural products, are produced for an Other, and this has consequences for interpretation.[13] The film text and its entire nexus of production and reception foregrounds a global network, and a complex, hierarchical structure that needs to be viewed not through the telescope of the First World, but through a look at its arrangement from the reverse direction of the Third World.

The "First World" has always had images from the "Other Worlds." The long-standing relation with the colonies gave rise to the discipline of anthropology, more recently termed ethnography, Oriental studies, and cultural studies. Those disciplines brought news to the master nations about distant lands, while simultaneously deploying the knowledge/power paradigm that has further strengthened colonial rule. Currently popular culture — travel, tourism, literature, film and now even music videos — uses these "Other Worlds" as exotic locales for telling tales of romance and adventure of the western subject. The logic of capitalism as an economic system is that it needs constant energizing through the production of new commodities, a constant search for novelty. This perhaps can partially explain the recent outburst of images from "Other Worlds" within the western world.

Films like GANDHI, PASSAGE TO INDIA, and THE COLOR PURPLE are distributed widely among a western audience, partially leading to what Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer call a "de-marginalizing" and "de-centering" of the traditional "center-margin" boundaries.[14] However, none of these films have been made by members of the groups they represent. Films made by members of the Third World are only just being granted the rites of passage, so to speak.

The fact that there are emerging forms of self-representation originating in those "Other Worlds" seems to suggest an improvement over the forms of representation

produced only by the 'First World.' And given the incipient nature of the flow of media texts from the "Third World," the few products that are received in the west become the only images of self-representation from the "Other World." The creators of these become the ambassadors of the ideology embedded in these images. We must also bear in mind what Aijaz Ahmad points out about literary texts, for it can be extended to the entire cultural field; there is a mechanism of selective acceptance that operates when it comes to admitting writers and cultural artists from "Other Worlds."<sup>[15]</sup> Thus texts winning the consent of their audience/constituency become part of "common sense" and are diffused into hegemony.

Sneja Gunew in an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak speaks of the problem in reception by the First World, where an individual artist/speaker may quickly be accepted as representing his/her entire community. This has implications "in terms of funding and dissemination of their work ...the few token figures function as a very secure alibi."<sup>[16]</sup> Thus in the case of cultural representations of the so-called minorities in the First World, given the limitations of resources available to these groups, one idea/ideology succeeds at the cost of others. This is a continual problem among minorities struggling to make themselves heard above the din of the hegemonic voice, and it deeply impacts the politics of production.

The authority of a film like SALAAM BOMBAY! rests on the filmmaker's identity as an Indian. Viewed from the First World, Nair represents the indigenous filmmaker, ethnographer, woman of color — representing her own country, her own people. Viewed from the other side of the boundaries of the international division between "First" and "Third World," Nair is a Non-Resident-Indian (NRI), that class of Indians with all the accouterments of privileges granted by the Indian government. The government of India offers NRIs special incentives to invest in India, with a promise of favorable returns.

Nair's status as an NRI and the privilege it affords is exemplified by her relation with the Indian State. Bharucha points to the manner in which the Indian government despite its apparent "animosity" actually went along with the film, allowing Nair to officially represent India at the Academy Awards in Hollywood. She at the same time needs the Indian affiliation to "enhance" her "authenticity" and ties "back home." It is a project in which they both need each other. Referring to SALAAM BOMBAY! Bharucha expresses his fears about the dangers of the NRI, with special economic privileges in banking, finance and industry being offered the authority to represent Indian culture and "reality."<sup>[17]</sup>

As a member of the Indian diaspora, the filmmaker Mira Nair has left her home country, like many of us who come to the U.S. with the hope of joining the ranks of the international cultural elite. She thus falls into the interstices of the Third and First World, and she is part of the class of post-colonial intellectuals and artists of the Third World practicing in the First World. What then is the specific construction of this post-colonial intellectual, and is her intervention in her/our country necessarily a departure from the now-recognized problem of Orientalism? For my purposes I am conflating the category of the post-colonial intellectual and cultural artist, since there is little difference in their institutional and historical construction. How does the situatedness of such a post-colonial intellectual leave his/her invisible signature on the cultural representation produced?

A film like SALAAM BOMBAY! interpellates precisely the issues of self-representation from the "Other World," but in the context of a complex colonial history and its production of stratified subjectivities. Nair and my position as post-colonial intellectuals must be understood within the master narrative of two hundred years of colonial history and recent decolonization. Tracing the genealogy of the post-colonial intellectual takes us back to Lord Macaulay's famous and often quoted Minute on Education in 1835. Macaulay, known for having laid the foundation of an educational system in India, stated its objective succinctly: to create "a class of persons Indian in blood and color but British in taste."

The category of the postcolonial intellectual has been constituted historically by the transformation of the indigenous elite through its encounter with British Rule. The counter colonial challenge posed by nationalism from the mid nineteenth to the mid twentieth century succeeded in creating autonomous nation states along with a well entrenched national bourgeoisie. It is from this strata that post-colonial intellectuals emerged, and it is they who have been made the heroes of the traditional narrative of anti-imperialism, even as they repositioned themselves within the structures set up under colonial rule.

The post-colonial discourse carried out among post-colonial intellectuals has failed to openly accept our own advantageous class position. It is for this reason that I find the categories of the "colonized subjects," the "post-colonial subjects" and the "post-colonial woman" undifferentiated and problematic. Spivak is right when she points out that the elite native speaks on behalf of the subaltern, and his or her speech silences the voice of the subaltern. The binary opposition between colonizer and colonized, then, is too simplistic. It is this complexity in the transformation of the decolonized nations that renders Säid's category of "insider" vs. "outsider" unsatisfactory.[18]

I want to suggest that the class of insider intellectuals (the post-colonial intellectuals) became veritable outsiders. They/we participate in the reproduction of the west by making it the site of enunciation.[19] This is only an extension of the phenomenon of the western ethnographer/anthropologist attempting to understand the Other in order to see a better reflection of the Self. The difference now is that the nonwestern elite subject has been incorporated into the image of the western Self and sees its own non-elite subjects of investigation as the Other.

In dealing with the politics of representation, I would like to point out the complexity of issues surrounding representation and the unresolved tangle of problems that have a bearing on Nair's film. It is obviously not sufficient to see Nair as the Other and therefore the producer of an "authentic" representation of the "Other World." The complex historical subjectivity of a post-colonial intellectual must be borne in mind. Nair is representing her Other. Viewed from the subject position of the First World, her film then becomes the representation of the Other by the Other.

In conclusion I would like to address an obvious question that might be addressed to me. How do I as a critic privilege my own reading of the situation over Nair's? As a post-colonial intellectual, I share with the filmmaker a common history and heritage. As a fellow Indian, I share with her a similar trajectory. We have a common class background and cultural apparatus that enable us to arrive on the shores of this country to pursue academic and artistic interests.

How then, it may be asked, do I see her as overdetermined by her class position, yet open up a space that assumes a lack of complete closure in my own case? I do not wish to argue that personal politics is overdetermined by class. Our political affiliations are a matter of choice and interest. Nair does not choose to raise issues of class and colonization. What I can say for myself, however, is that my approach is a materialist one, a position that Nair scrupulously avoids. She prefers instead the path of cinematic realism and of heart-rending pathos in representing the lives of the poor.

## NOTES

1. Rustom Bharucha, "Haraam Bombay" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 10, 1989, pp. 1275-1279.
2. Craig Owens, 'The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Post-modernism" in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modern Culture* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983). pp. 69-70.
3. "In my opinion you were the first — in your books and in the practical sphere — to teach us something absolutely fundamental: the indignity of speaking for others." Craig Owens quotes Deleuze in conversation with Foucault in "Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation between Michel Foucault and Giles Deleuze," (ed.) D.F Bouchard, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 209.
4. A large section of the massive child-labor force in India is involved in "rag-picking," a virtual recycling industry that depends on child-labor to sift through garbage dumps to collect plastic, glass, metals etc.
5. I use this term in the Barthesian sense.
6. *murti*, Hindi word for sculptures.
7. Quoted in *India Today*, August 15, 1988, p.132.
8. *naqli*, Hindi word for fake, false.
9. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak interviewed by Walter Adamson on "The Problems of Self-Representation" (1986) reprinted in Sara Harasym (ed.), *The Post-Colonial Critic* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 56.
10. Dana Polan, "A Brechtian Cinema? Towards a Politics of Self-Reflexive Film" in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods Vol. 2*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1985). pp. 661-671.
11. This term is taken from Mary E. John's essay "Postcolonial Feminists in the Western Field: Anthropologists and Native Informants" in *Inscriptions* No. 5, (1989), pp. 49-72. An occasional publication by the Group for Critical Study Discourse, U.C.S.C (Santa Cruz). She uses it in the context of her discussion of Foucault's suggested role for intellectuals in struggles within and outside universities

12. Cornel West, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference" in Russell Ferguson, et al. (eds.), *Out-There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MJ.T. Press, 1990).
13. Edward Säid, "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community" in Hal Foster (S.) *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), p. 135.
14. Isaac Julian and Kobena Mercer, "De-Margin and De-Center", *Screen* Vol. 29, no. 4 (Autumn 1988), pp. 2-10.
15. Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and 'National Allegory,'" *Social Text* No. 15 (Fall 1986), pp. 65-88.
16. Sneja Gunew in an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on "Questions of Multi-Culturalism," reprinted in Sara Harasym, *The Post-Colonial Critic* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 60.
17. Rustom Bharucha, op cit.
18. Edward Säid, "Orientalism Reconsidered," *Cultural Critique* Vol. 1 (Fall 1985), pp. 89-107.
19. Mary E. John, cit.

# Blood in the square: representations of democracy in China

by Scott Nygren

from *Jump Cut*, no. 37, July 1992, pp. 37-43

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1992, 2006

"Certain words and phrases have an amazing ability to sustain many definitions...The most flexible term of all may well be 'democracy.'"

— Scott L. Malcomson[1][[open notes in new window](#)]

Representations of democracy in China by U.S. media have tended to repress numerous cross-cultural ironies and contradictions in favor of a unitary narrative derived from Western melodrama. These accounts can be weighed against alternative narratives in Chinese and Japanese cinema, ones which foreground the complexity and ambivalences created by the introduction of Western political models to Asia. My paper will consider U. S., Chinese and Japanese representations of democracy in Asia in order to address problems of translation, displacement, and erasure that occur by the circulation of the term "democracy" and the multiple signifieds that it triggers.

Specifically, I will consider U. S. mass media coverage of China in terms of the combined blindness and insight triggered by ideological identification and positioned by the narrative construction of news. I will then address two Chinese films produced by the Fifth Generation at the last moment before foreclosure by the events in Tiananmen Square, Huang Jianxin's SAMSARA (LUNHUI, 1988) and Zhou Xiaowen's OBSESSION (FENGKUANG DE DAIJIA, 1989). My purpose in writing this is not simply to unmask the U. S. media's false treatments of Chinese events in order to replace such images by other reports imagined as true, but to problematize representations of democracy in terms of the psychoanalytic, social and discursive assumptions they construct in different circumstances.

One of the curious features of Western reporting on China in May and June of 1989 was the representation of "democracy." [2] Once the Western mass media determined that student protests in Beijing signified a "democracy movement," newscasts gradually began to portray their victory as inevitable. These reports then supported this claim by extensive interviews with Chinese citizens suddenly willing to speak candidly with foreigners. Only after the June 45 massacre did the media belatedly consider that those in the bureaucracy who opposed the students also opposed foreign ideas and avoided Western media. Journalists sympathetic to the students were then dismayed to discover that Chinese authorities analyzed

coverage of events to identify participants for to arrest.[3]

Despite this, students welcomed Western coverage of events and the heroic portrayal of themselves and made use of it for their own ends. During the "Empty University Movement" which followed the massacre, for example, students in Guangzhou videotaped footage from Hong Kong television to take back to theft homes in different parts of the country. This made it possible to distribute information counter to the official version of events.[4] The multiple mirrors, misrecognitions, appropriations, and ironies in this struggle of representations cannot simply be disregarded as the inevitable consequence of enthusiastic on-the-spot coverage. Rather, they indirectly suggest the conflict of discursive formations between Asia and the West through the paradoxes and problems intrinsic to that conflict. By writing in these terms, I mean to suggest the links among psychoanalysis, knowledge and power that have become possible to theorize after the work of Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault.[5]

Other recent events in Asia and Eastern Europe continue to be reported in Western media as if democracy were a transparent and unambiguous term, identical with a consumer economy.[6] When, for example, the first visitors from East Berlin crossed the newly permeable wall into West Berlin, they were greeted with cash awards of \$50 each by West German banks. This richly paradoxical encounter was reported in U. S. public media as if it were completely unproblematic. Following the classical tropes of the Cold War, re-embedded during the Reagan era, and restated after Reagan as "the decline of Communism," all Communist regimes have again been collapsed into a unitary figure. This reduces socialism to Stalinism, Stalin to Hitler, and Hitler to a uniquely monstrous figure safely assigned to an historical and cultural other. The paranoid escalation of identifications implicit in this series is again repressed, together with its translation of fundamentalist Satanism into a secularized melodrama. Implicit in this conjunction of psychoanalysis and melodrama lies an allegory of a cultural identity specific to the West, theorized by Lacan in terms of the cogito.[7]

Any effort to deconstruct the paranoid fabrications of the cogito risks provoking a resistance. Here such deconstruction depends on recognition of the melodramatic structure of mass media news reporting in the West. Melodramatic strategies are often justified by the industry as transparent entertainment devices necessary to reach a mass audience, yet these devices construct an ethnocentric and absolute binarism which becomes displaced onto international affairs. For example, the theatricalization of the news has recently taken such forms as the restaging of crimes on "Saturday Night with Connie Chung," staged the passing of a briefcase on ABC news to "illustrate" State Department suspicions of Felix Bloch's espionage, [8] and the upbeat music themes on CBS's "48 Hours" which function to convert news footage into action drama.

Far from being a recent development, such a fusion of melodrama and news characterizes television history. One landmark in this process was CBS' decision to replace Walter Cronkite with Dan Rather instead of Roger Mudd, even though Mudd was universally acknowledged by his peers as the better newsman, because Rather had stronger star recognition. Another landmark was Eisenhower's hiring of an ad agency to manage his 1952 Presidential campaign.[9] The Reagan administration's elevation of melodrama to national policy was not unusual in

these terms but comes as the logical consequence of defining the real through centralized mass media imagery. Such imagery continually works to promote emotional identification with the kind of Western logocentric humanism theorized by Derrida. It often does so by establishing an imaginary division of a sound and image text into verbal authority and visual truth.[10]

The imaginary constructions of melodrama position democracy as if it lay outside the history and discursive formations of logocentric humanism, class polarization, gender roles and the psychoanalytic organization of the subject. Indeed, a momentarily famous essay of 1989, by U. S. State Department official Francis Fukuyama, even theorized this representation and its neo-Hegelian assumption about "the autonomous power of ideas." Fukuyama declared the end of history through the triumph of liberal democracy and the "ineluctable spread of consumerist Western culture."<sup>[11]</sup> This essay's uncritical popularity among mass media journalists paralleled its reiteration of dominant ideology as a hyperbolic compound of idealism, capital and progress.

Ironies and contradictions in such a representation of democracy are insistently marginalized. A statue that represented Chinese democracy in the monumental romantic style of the nineteenth century was recognized as ironic by student radicals in Beijing, but accepted as strategically necessary. The pervasive corruption and sexual scandals undermining the current Japanese government never seem to raise questions about the significance of democracy, which is instead celebrated unproblematically as a universal benefit. A socialist government in France, founded on long-standing antagonism to Soviet hegemony, continues as an ally of the United States throughout the Reagan and Bush administrations. A labor union government in Poland is celebrated by a U. S. administration which fights to break unions at home, but this contradiction too seems normal after the oxymoronic rhetoric institutionalized during the Reagan era. White House denunciations of Islamic fundamentalism and its links to terrorism never function to question the threat to democracy posed by Republican ties to Christian fundamentalism and the election of a former Klan member as a Republican. The decline of central controls in the former Soviet block has only belatedly been linked by U. S. reporting to an upsurge of racist violence, from revived anti-Semitism in Russia to mob attacks on Hungarians in Romania and Christian-Moslem guerilla warfare in Azerbaijan. How often even now, is such violence abroad related in the mass media to events in Bensonhurst and Howard Beach?

The problem is in part yet another variation on Orientalism, which functions here to include Slavic cultures as well. Events which mirror dominant ideology in the West are celebrated. Those which mirror Western problems are condemned as if totally other. Significant cultural difference and multiple determinations masked by the mythical use of the term "democracy" are both ignored.

Yet the introduction of Western ideas is always multiple. It weaves together individualism and irresponsibility, romantic love and patriarchy, national independence and racism, industrial development and ecological disaster, and extremes of wealth and poverty. These ideas in turn have multiple and unpredictable effects, ranging from family disintegration and personal crisis to financial corruption and the kind of militaristic isolationism that affected Japan in the 1930's and now characterizes Iran and Iraq. Legalized democratic institutions

play a significant role in these cultural transformations, but they can also co-exist with alternative forms of absolutism and violence dispersed to other domains.

As long as democracy is equated with nationalism, for example, as in U. S. reporting about the Lithuanian independence movement, then "freedom" becomes identified with a demand for a transparent signification, a domain in which language, race and culture are singular and uncontested. "Progress" and "idealism" become inextricably linked to ethnic violence. Competing demands for absolute meaning increasingly exclude heterogeneity and the play of meaning which Jacques Derrida calls *diffrance*. The problem here is one of shifting margins. As long as ethnic identification functions to oppose central control, as in the Soviet Union, it disseminates difference within a totalitarian system. Yet as soon as ethnic identification becomes the basis for an alternative state, it can establish the same exclusionary system of unitary meaning which it previously functioned to oppose.

The legitimate contest of discursive formations becomes erased on behalf of idealist states, each of which reinstitutionalizes a repression of the other in an escalating balkanization of violence. State terror becomes ethnic terror. The rationalist system of Soviet Communism, which partially offset racist and sexist violence, is discarded for an irrational series of identifications which have no such bars to intimate transgression. This is not to say that Stalinism was better than the ethnic destabilization that led Eastern Europe to become the flashpoint for two World Wars, but only that one system of violence offset the other during the 40 years which followed WWII. These multiple communities cannot simply be "liberated" without consequences.

I would also like to address these problems by considering two recent Chinese films, both produced at the Xi'an Studio when it was still under the innovative direction of Wu Tianming. Since Tiananmen, Wu has been in exile in the United States, and the fate of individual filmmakers remaining in China is less well known. These two films exemplify the last relatively uncensored articulations of changing social conditions in China by Fifth Generation filmmakers immediately before the massacre. The melodramas *SAMSARA* and *OBSESSION* can be analyzed in terms of Western influence on representations of sexuality and violence. Such an analysis can help decipher competing organizations of power, knowledge and desire.

*SAMSARA* and *OBSESSION* both represent the influence of Western democracy through the trope of transgression. The films contrast Western individualism to China's consensus society by presenting a myth about an outlaw younger generation which violates the norms of past practice. In both films, as Paul Clark has noted, characters live "atomized and alienated lives,"[12] isolated from divorced or absent parents and far from the extended family that often serves as a metaphor for Chinese communism. The figures of transgression and the absent family used in these films parallel those of U. S. film noir and suggest in part a conscious influence of Western styles. The directors sought to imitate Western action or suspense films to achieve a mass audience, a goal necessitated by the outside funding they received for studio co-production. *OBSESSION* in particular was immensely popular in China.

Both films also foreground character psychology within a naturalistic mise-en-scene, in contrast to Huang's earlier *BLACK CANNON INCIDENT (HEIPAO SHIJIAN, 1985)*, in which color and stylized imagery played a more important role.

Paul Clark, in discussing the regime's renewed attack on "bourgeois liberalization" after June 4, acknowledges the "individualistic, action-oriented hedonism" of most new movies prior to June 4. Yet Huang's and Thou's recent work recalls such Japanese films as Mizoguchi's *SISTERS OF THE GION* (1936) through its ambivalent representation of Western individuality.

*SAMSARA*, as Paul Clark notes, begins playfully before it turns deadly serious. At the beginning, the central character Shi Ba performs the stereotyped rebellion of a Western teenager. He runs down the up escalator to a subway platform, lights a cigarette next to a "No Smoking" sign, and discovers an attractive young woman named Yu Jing. The camera plays with composition by sighting on a game of cards through a series of triangular hand grips and then turns back to Shi Ms point-ofview shot to see Yu Jing replaced by an older woman who has sat in front of her. This positioning of an individualized viewer as transgressive adolescent male seems so familiar as to be a selfconscious pastiche of classical Western cinematic narration.

In this context, Huang then plays with cultural role reversals and problems of translation: Shi Ba remarks to Yu Jing at her dance studio that "only Western clothes fit me," foregrounding Shi Ba's claim to Western self-positioning. Later at dinner with Yu Jing, two other Chinese and two North American men, he complains that the Chinese have for a hundred years allowed Westerners to act arrogantly, but the American addressed can't understand him because he speaks too fast. As in *BLACK CANNON INCIDENT*, Huang's earlier film, direct expression across cultures becomes deflected by the characters' self-important posturing and an unintentional collapse of meaning.

*SAMSARA* then presents the story of young private entrepreneurs in contemporary Beijing woven together with blackmail and violence. Shi Ba privately sells such merchandise as consumer electronics and engages in transactions both legal and illegal in a life style made possible by Deng's economic reforms of the 1980's. His initial success attracts blackmailers who first threaten, then severely beat him, leaving him permanently crippled. Though his romance with Yu Jing had at first seemed to flourish, by the time they marry, an emotional deadness has set in. At the end of the film, Shi Ba climbs over the balcony railing of his high-rise apartment and falls to his death.

*SAMSARA* represents the central character's individualism ambivalently, as neither progressive nor regressive in simple terms, but as ultimately suicidal under present circumstances. Like Juzo Itami's *A TAXING WOMAN* in Japan (1987), where the central entrepreneur character is also crippled, *SAMSARA* implicitly critiques the equation of individualism and capitalist investment as unavoidably corrupt. Enrichment appears inextricably bound up with criminal victimization and a paralysis of desire. Itami suggests that the new democratic Japan is founded on corruption at the highest levels: in *A TAXING WOMAN RETURNS* (1989), the greatest criminals escape prosecution. Similarly, the 1989 student protests in Beijing had as a principle target the extensive corruption that Dengts reforms had helped create.

Instead of assuming the inevitable progress of democratic consumerism, *SAMSARA* suggests more interesting questions at the root of Chinese student protests. How can the totalized systems of state communism and monopoly capital

be mutually deconstructed to reconcile economic initiative with social responsibility? How can the "equivalential" logic that Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe find both in classical democracy and in Marxism[13] be infiltrated by the problematics of desire? If Shi Ba and Yu Jing represent the extinction of youthful initiative and desire under the present conditions of dictatorship and corruption, it is not clear that democratic reforms alone, even as theorized by Laclau and Mouffe, could bring them back to life.

As a film by one of the Fifth Generation's most skillful and innovative directors, SAMSARA asks us to keep the larger questions of film practice in mind. Jean-François Lyotard has argued the necessity of thinking through the interconnection of political and economic philosophy with the psychoanalysis of subjectivity and desire. How can film, as a mode of cultural representation, articulate what Lyotard calls a libidinal economy? Can film produce a textual game which coordinates the play of innovation and social justice?[14] Does a pessimistic narrative of character psychology mark the limits of this style for reinscribing Chinese culture?

Some of these problems find a different but equally disturbing formulation in Zhou's OBSESSION. In OBSESSION, Qingqing pursues the rapist of her younger sister Lanlan; he is a criminal portrayed as psychotically obsessed with Western pornography and guns. Without assistance from her family, Qingqing herself becomes obsessed with pursuing the criminal independent of the slow official investigation. At the end, she murders the criminal rather than allow the police to take him into custody.

Zhou specifically shot the film on location in Qingdao, a former German possession, in order to set the story in and around Western-style architecture. The rape occurs near a Christian church, and the rapist and his brother are later discovered to live hidden in the church tower, surrounded by racks of guns. In addition, as a film OBSESSION models itself after a Western crime thriller. Western iconography and styles of representation become multiply identified with uncontrollable phallocentric violence. The film assumes that pornography and guns both characterize the West and lead directly to chaos. In this sense, OBSESSION approximates the official denunciations of foreign ideas as "spiritual pollution." Deng's campaign against foreign pollution in 1983-84 failed but has been recently revived, and pornographic "yellow books" produced by Chinese publishers before June 4 to generate profits have again been repressed.[15] Such antipollution campaigns are also disturbingly reminiscent of Japanese attitudes antagonistic to the West during its militarist period, which equated liberal democracy and speculative capitalism with disease and crime.[16]

The concept of Western pollution formulates a partial critique of humanism which cannot be completely ignored, but it derives from a position of patriarchal authority even more severe than that which it criticizes. The imaginary figure of pollution in Asia is a mirror of Orientalism in the West. Both figures displace a repressed and unresolved internal conflict onto the other. Chris Berry has argued that xenophobia circulates among the Chinese in the form of hostility towards everything not of the Han race, which reproduces a racist division within China against ethnic minorities.[17] As in Romania, where the xenophobia promoted by the Ceausescu regime served to mask internal ethnic divisions, the violence which OBSESSION attaches to the West serves to displace a consideration of violence

internal to China.

Yet OBSESSION, again like the Western crime genre it imitates, is simultaneously fascinated with the actions it condemns. In a move calculated to attract audiences, Thou originally appended idealized nude sequences of the sisters showering to the beginning and end of the film. However, official intervention forced the scenes' removal prior to continued distribution in China. The film also invites identification with violence by Qingqing's melodramatic murder of the criminal in excess of police capture. In both cases, a viewer position is constructed wherein transgressive fantasies of voyeurism and vengeance represent a rupture from the social norms of a consensus society, so that regressive fantasy becomes associated with the interiorization of an individualist viewer psychology.

However, in a limited way, the film works to turn its ostensibly Western voyeurism and violence back against itself, as a displacement of misogynistic violence within China. Lanlan, in the nude shower sequence that begins the original film, asks her sister "What's wrong with me?" — a question that not only foreshadows the rape but questions her status as female. The film's title follows, together with a close up of the future rapist staring through binoculars. As in REAR WINDOW, the viewer's position is represented within the film as that of a distanced male voyeur.

The film repeatedly inscribes male domination and female suffering through Qingqing's professional role as a nurse in a maternity ward. Immediately after the title, Qingqing appears at work, where women suffer in childbirth and fantasize about male pregnancy. A husband is denounced who has refused to allow a Caesarean even though his wife is a week overdue and may die. Later in the film, indirect references suggest the Chinese preference for male children and the relative worthlessness of women. In Lanlan's school class, a boy tells the young woman teacher that she's out of date with her ideas about sexuality, and he reads her a scientific text on ovulation and the choice of a child's sex. Near the end of the film, a family rushes into the hospital shouting, "Beat her to death!" to attack Qingqing as a murderer because their boy was born dead. In the mob rhetoric wishing to murder the nurse because of the lack of a boy, one can perhaps read the figure of female infanticide that has been well documented as a primary index of misogyny in China.

Interestingly, OBSESSION develops the image of voyeurism not only diagnostically through the rapist's obsession with pornography, but self-reflexively against the recording media of photography and video. Shortly after Lanlan's rape, Qingqing visits a young woman friend in a video production studio who is dubbing in an hysterical scream over the image of a woman in a bath. This curious incident, strategically placed in the rape narrative parallel to the image of binoculars after the shower scene, foregrounds the fictional construction of female victimization for audience consumption. In contrast, Qingqing's attempt to appropriate the camera for surveillance must work against the grain. During the search for the criminal, Qingqing attempts to photograph every man on the streets. However, she has forgotten to take the lens cap off, so she has nothing at first to ask Lanlan to identify.

OBSESSION is an immature work, only the third feature by Zhou, and its concerns may seem partially confused. There is a degree of instability in its meaning. However, this perhaps unintentional instability makes it symptomatically more

interesting. The most direct reading of the film's contradictory moves is to identify its representation of Western individualism with phallocentric violence, opposed to a defense of women's interests equated with police authority. Yet the film works simultaneously to create a position of voyeuristic interiority and to deconstruct it. At the same time, Qingqing achieves her own unstable autonomy outside the aid of either family or state. Insofar as OBSESSION problematizes the conflict of individual and group, of social justice and desire, and of representation and *diffrance*, it approximates the conditions of China's democracy movement.

The problem in SAMSARA and OBSESSION is not simply the lack of a humanist, idealist democracy, as if liberty were a unitary and transcendent goal in a closed system of meaning superior to that of the Chinese. Regarding these films, the problem is rather how to negotiate competing discursive formations from both China and the West, to generate new texts which distribute power, meaning and desire differently than before. Subjectivity in these films is dislocated across racial, sexual and cultural differences, so that no enclosure of individuality remains unproblematic. Neither, however, do consensus groups of family or state resolve problems of initiative and desire. The strategies of the Western action film, centering the subject as they do in male individuality, function here to decenter consensus norms; action film codes inscribe a space for desire and invention to enter into the scene. But in both films, these strategies already appear to reach their limit and turn pessimistic and contradictory. The limits of Deng's opening to the West were already reached in the films made before June 4, and complicate the Western media image of student protest in China.

To theatricalize Tiananmen Square, students placed their plaster Goddess of Liberty so that it faced the monumental portrait of Mao hanging over the south gate of the Forbidden City. They juxtaposed one idealized monument against another, opening discursive boundaries across gender lines and across the cultural traditions of East and West. The student leaders disavowed identification with the monumental nineteenth-century style of the Goddess, but they recognized its strategic importance in altering the square's architectural construction of meaning. Presumably the students did not study with Robert Venturi, but their strategy parallels postmodernism in its juxtaposition of contradictory styles and sources. A replica of French iconography, by way of the United States, meets a signifier of the German text of Marx translated to China by way of the Soviet Union. Kitsch meets socialist realism in an encounter that transforms Mao's monumental portrait into a Warhol replica in its own space. The architectural absence of the square, the space of the people, speaks to the presence of Mac, in its iconic identification with imperial China, evoking the feudal-like blood ties linking the leadership, ties that are well known but foreclosed from public discussion.

Western media coverage of China paradoxically functioned in the West to reinforce the unitary closure of dominant ideology but worked in China to destabilize meaning and cut across discursive boundaries. The heroic representation of the democracy movement in Western journalism, like the monumental Goddess in the Square, circulates in China in the context of an information economy regulated by the tropes of scientific Marxism. Western coverage in this context again translates events into melodrama, but here conflicts with the insistence on indexical realism and metonymic detail characteristic of Communist state news. The day after the massacre, the official headline was "Children's Day Observances Cancelled in

Tiananmen Square."<sup>[18]</sup> The contrast of Western coverage transforms this realist detail into the modernist trope of irony, recalling Deng's condescending characterization of the students as "unruly children." Irony can be a powerful discursive weapon against the totalized control of information. Its traces in the Fifth Generation often mark pivotal moments in the construction of meaning. When Chen Kaige's *BIG PARADE* was first released, for example, the representation of the Red Army seemed relentlessly laudatory to Western observers, but its understated ironies invite reevaluation after the army's schisms in relation to the massacre.

Wang Yuejin has argued that history itself is melodrama.<sup>[19]</sup> He equates two discursive formations introduced into China from abroad, both derived from the nineteenth-century West. In this postmodernist encounter of nineteenth-century Western tropes on Chinese terrain, melodramatic history disrupts scientific humanism. Early in *OBSESSION*, Lanlan walks home with a boy from school in the rain, debating the educational value of science versus that of history. In contrast, Marlin Fitzwater, as spokesman for George Bush, argued during Brent Scowcroft's friendly visit to Deng on December 10, 1989, that U. S. policy "won't be focused on the past."<sup>[20]</sup> By asking the United States to forget the historical rupture of June in order to maintain close ties to China, George Bush is no doubt making clear in several ways where his sympathies lie.

Both *SAMSARA* and *OBSESSION* foreground the problem of violence as they consider the issue of Western discursive formations in China, a violence which returns against the democracy movement in the Tiananmen Square massacre. Failure to negotiate the different constructions of power, knowledge and desire now circulating through China inevitably leads to an escalation of violence among competing absolutisms, much as it has in the ethnic conflicts of the Middle East or Eastern Europe.

Ironically, by deciding to visibly crush the protest movement in full view of foreign reporters, Deng has entered into the domain of spectacle. He has fostered a trope of excess belonging to melodrama and to the opposition who favor a rupture in the state communism's "scientific" regulation of history. In erasing the contest of discourses in the Square, Deng triggered the distribution of videotaped Western coverage of the massacre throughout the country during the Empty University Movement. This videotaped material helped promote the destabilization of meaning he wished to suppress. Mirsky has speculated that Deng's disinformation campaign that followed the massacre may well have been intended to confuse rather than persuade.<sup>[21]</sup> If so, then his strategy may also assist the protestors by spreading the destabilization of meaning from urban centers throughout the country.

Even after the massacre, it seemed likely that if a democratic vote had been taken, it might well have favored Deng's regime. The vast majority of the population remains rural peasantry who often see student concerns as remote from their own survival issues. In the information war that has followed June 4, the dissemination of videotaped Western coverage may well now be outside the government's capacity to control it. This same factor in Eastern Europe apparently helped lead to the overthrow of old regimes. In a novel by Tanizaki or Kawabata or in a film by Ozu, to suggest another ironic parallel, once the central characters' attitudes

change, it is unnecessary to depict the actions which inevitably follow. Does the present historical moment in China represent the pause in an Asian narrative long enough for the melodramatic impact of events to be fully absorbed before proceeding?

For the purposes of the present paper, it is sufficient that questions of power and desire remain paramount. I wish to avoid lapsing into the idealist fallacies of Hegel and Fukuyama. The project of reinscribing Chinese culture requires more than idealism if it is to succeed. Yet if Foucault has pioneered the theorization of knowledge and power in an information economy, his work alone does not allow us to think through the indeterminacy of meaning unavoidably encountered between cultures or the postmodernist problematization of subjectivity and desire. The most fruitful work for the cross-cultural analysis of political change now accordingly derives from those theorists who are able to think across the boundaries of deconstructive, psychoanalytic and political discourses. As models for the analysis of power and desire in the context of representational *differance*, one might consider not only Michel Foucault's work but Jean-François Lyotard's *Au Juste* and Barbara Johnson's *A World of Difference*.[22]

## NOTES

1. Scott L. Malcolmson, "Democratic Conventions: Robert Dahl's Poverty of Theory," *Voice Literary Supplement* (Oct. 1989), p. 24.
2. Although mass media reporting in general is the object of this discussion, specific materials reviewed for this paper have been selected primarily from *CBS News*, ABC's *Nightline*, and *The New York Times*. I have chosen these sources because they represent what are often considered to be the best or most credible among mass media alternatives.
3. Jonathan Mirsky, "The Empire Strikes Back," *New York Review of Books* (Feb. 1, 1990), pp. 21-25.
4. Sarah Trenholm, quoted in "Professor on Sabbatic in China During Student Massacre," the *Ithaca College News* (Oct. 11, 1989), p.3.
5. See Michel Foucault, "Discursive Formations," in *The Archeology of Knowledge* (trans. by A.M. Sheridan Smith of *L'Archeologie du Savoir*; New York: Pantheon, 1972), pp. 31-39. For Foucault's development of the archeological method into a genealogy of power and knowledge, see *Discipline and Punish* (Trans. by Alan Sheridan from *Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la prison*; New York: Vintage, 1979).
6. Problematising the representation of democracy in Asia is not entirely new. See, for example, the "Film and 'Democracy'" chapter in Noel Burch, *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 271-290.
7. See Jacques Lacan, "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis," in *Écrits: A Selection* (trans. by Alan Sheridan from *Écrits*; New York: W.W. Norton and Co. 1977), pp. 829.

8. See David Wise, "The Felix Bloch Affair," *New York Times Magazine* (May 13, 1990), p. 42.
9. See Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*.
10. See, for example, Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak from *De la Grammatologie*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).
11. *New York Times* (Aug. 27, 1989), p. £5.
12. Paul Clark, "Chinese Cinema in 1989," *Hawai'i International Film Festival Viewers' Guide* (1989), pp. 40-43.
13. See Bradley J. Macdonald, "Towards a Redemption of Politics: An Introduction to the Political Theory of Ernesto Laclau," *Strategies* No. 1 (Fall 1988), pp. 5-9; and Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).
14. Jean-François Lyotard, *Économie libidinale* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1974); Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming* (trans. by Wlad Godzich of *Au Juste*; Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1985).
15. Wu Tianming, public discussion, Hawaii International Film Festival (Nov. 29, 1989).
16. See John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon, 1986).
17. Chris Berry, paper delivered at the Asian Cinema Conference, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio (published in *Cinema Journal* 31:2).
18. Trenholm.
19. Wang Yuejin, "Melodrama as Historical Understanding." unpublished paper delivered at the Hawaii International Film Symposium, Honolulu, Nov. 27-Dec. 1, 1989.
20. Quoted in Mirsky, p.21.
21. Mirsky, p.24.
22. Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

# U.S. movies in China

by Peter Scheckner

from *Jump Cut*, no. 37, July 1992, pp. 44-49

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1992, 2006

In the Year of the Democratic Movement in the summer, 1988, Ramapo College of New Jersey, a largely suburban, middle-income state college, sent my wife and me to the People's Republic of China to teach for a year in the Beijing Institute of Tourism. This is a small four-year college, one of perhaps six in China, which produces most of the country's tourist guides and hotel administrators.

We were scheduled to return home in August, 1989, but when the shooting began in Tiananmen Square the night of June 3 and into the morning of the following day, we started to pack. Three days after the army moved into Tiananmen, after we'd been properly unnerved by the sight of dead students (not our own), burning military vehicles, and the sight of our U.S. friends fleeing, we left China with our six year old daughter.

We arrived in Beijing with a multi-format VCR, monitor, and camcorder. Against standing regulations to have all videos inspected at the airport, we had in our suitcases about thirty U.S. movies on videotape. We had been assigned to teach a variety of English and communication courses and planned to use feature films. My wife used the camera principally to teach oral and visual communication skills. Her students, the junior class, wrote and performed a series of short videotapes about their lives in China. They sent this "video letter" to our students at Ramapo College, hoping to promote international understanding and communication and waiting for a return letter.

I was to scheduled to teach a junior-level course called American Survey and a senior-level course called Western Culture. I planned to use film as a way of illustrating U.S. and European history and culture. Every week, from the beginning of September through the first two weeks in May, 1989, just before Beijing was placed under martial law and the schools were shut, my senior and junior classes saw a film. A few of the more determined film lovers chose to see these films while their fellow students were on the streets boycotting classes and keeping the army out of the city.

No doubt our students learned a lot about the West, though clearly their perspective was shaped by Hollywood. As for myself, I learned a lot about our Chinese college students, not all of which was pleasant, and most of which highlighted the complexities and contradictions of politics and ideology in China. I learned to take very little at face value about our own assumptions about China and

its people as they nervously entered the 1990s.

Because I had been warned that it was forbidden to show scenes involving nudity and any suggestion of sexuality, I took the rather severe and absurd step of censoring the first film, THE ODD COUPLE. When the Jack Lemmon character goes to a bar and sits directly beneath a nearly naked go-go dancer, I leaped in front of the video monitor and explained in hurried and barely coherent English that in China the showing of certain scenes was "against the rules." No one quite knew what I was saying or why I was acting so strangely, but this was my first week teaching in China and maybe the juniors assumed this was the way certain "American" teachers behave. Besides, Chinese students rarely question their teachers' worth or behavior, especially those of the "Foreign Experts."

Nevertheless, after my initial and crude attempt at censorship I ceased blocking the monitor. In CROCODILE DUNDEE the juniors watched, with stoicism, prostitutes fighting with pimps, a transvestite, and some sexual dalliance. After class, the head of the school's Audio/Video office, a retired People's Liberation Army officer who had begun auditing the class, informed me that Chinese students were not allowed to see scenes involving prostitutes or drugs. He did admit, however, that both vices had reappeared in the People's Republic. Thereafter, if I anticipated a scene involving sex, as I did when I showed BIRDY, I simply left the room and came back when the coast was clear.

The movie which elicited the most memorable reaction from the class was THE DEFIANT ONES. The 1958 film by Stanley Kramer portrays the growing friendship between a black and a white convict in the South who initially can't get past their racial hostility. Here, I thought, was a film made for China's youth. I had come to China with the assumption that the Chinese, given their own racial oppression and a revolutionary past, shared my own democratic values about race. To my dismay, however, the juniors were barely been able to contain their laughter throughout the film. The students found most comical the scene where the two men fall into a deep pit at a construction site during a rainstorm and spend a while slipping and sliding around in the mud until they realize that only if they cooperate will they escape. What was it my students found so funny? I asked the juniors to write their reaction to the film. In their papers they wrote they were hoping the men would escape and felt disappointed when they were caught.

So what explained their laughter? I asked an U.S. colleague who had taught the juniors since their freshman year. "Peter," he began in a tone that suggested how naive he thought I was,

"the Chinese are 95% Han. They virtually have no minorities, no immigrants, no races. None of them has ever met a black. They think they are superior to you-a white man-in culture, in civilization, in heritage. Can you imagine how much more superior they feel towards blacks?"

"Then why are we here? Why have they invited so many foreign experts to work in China? Why is the government paying us so much money?"

"Because the Chinese need our technology and our methodology. They'd like your video equipment too if you'd give it to them. They want

all the things they didn't get because of colonialism, the Cultural Revolution, and as a result of feudalism."

"But why did my students laugh?"

"Because for them the sight of a black man chained to a white man was an absurdity. Furthermore, most Chinese have absolutely no sympathy for criminals. Criminals are executed sometimes by the thousands every year in China. When a man is arrested in China he is already guilty. There is no question in your students' minds as to the guilt of your two convicts. They laughed because the whole notion of what they were seeing was ridiculous."

"But what about the papers they wrote? They said they were hoping the two men would escape."

"No. They wrote what they did because they're smart. They know what you wanted them to say. They know what to say because their government tells them that racism is not the socialist way, that Africa is a necessary ally for third world countries like China. But they don't believe a single word of it."

I next showed my senior class Franco Zeffirelli's ROMEO AND JULIET. While the movie was running, I provided a simple translation because the level of English of this class was lower than that of the juniors. During the scene in which Romeo and Juliet die, kissing and in one another's arms, I kept silent, but a few of the men were giggling and laughing as the doomed lovers expire. This time it wasn't difficult to interpret why they'd had this reaction. It is the rare Chinese film which even hints of sex, and the seniors were embarrassed at the open display of physical affection they were seeing. At the same time the seniors were joyful because Romeo and Juliet have made love successfully against all the odds: the star-crossed lovers are of high school age; their families are feuding; none of their relatives approve of their marriage; and Romeo and Juliet manage on their own to make love and get married, if only for a few days.

Although the seniors were in their early twenties, and Romeo and Juliet are in their teens, the Chinese could identify with Shakespeare's heroes. They do what young Chinese students can only dream about: fall in love, have sex, and elope. However, our students certainly were able to relate to the illicit nature of Romeo and Juliet's relationship, since dating among students in China generally has to be discreet until they graduate. The language of the film is that of Elizabethan England and the movie is set in Renaissance Italy. "What can you young people here in China relate to in this film?" I asked the class. We talked about Chinese parents who oppose their children's marriages. Yes, this happens in rural China, the students admitted, and that peasants occasionally kill each other in feuds.

"What about last week's incident when thousands of Chinese students beat up of some African students in Nanjing?" I ask, still thinking of THE DEFIANT ONES and my conversation with my colleague. "Does this show an intolerance of one group for another — as with the Montagues and the Capulets?"

Two thousand Chinese students marched to the dormitories of the African students

in Nanjing University, many demanding the Africans' death. Some Africans had refused to show their student identification cards at a school dance, and they brought as dates two Chinese girls. A fight ensued between Chinese and African students. Police were called in and all the Africans were forcibly removed, some with cattle prods, to a nearby town, for their own safety said the authorities.

Comments from China's 1989 class of tourist guides and hotel administrators and questions by the jiaoshou (professor) follow:

"I don't like blacks. I'm sorry, I just don't like them," said Rocky.

"Why not?" I asked.

"I don't know why. Blacks break the law here. They don't obey China's Constitution."

"How? What do they do that is illegal?"

"They don't show their passes at the gates of the university."

"Do they have to show their passes? Where do the security guards think these Africans are from? From out of town?"

"Of course, they have to show their passes."

"Then how come I don't? Do you think it's because I'm white?"

"Of course you have to show your pass."

"Well, I've been to Beida [Peking University] many times and never had to."

"If you went with a Chinese girl you'd have to. The girls those Africans took with them to the dance were prostitutes and it was these girls who refused to show their passes to the security guards."

"I thought there was no prostitution in China."

"There is, but it's illegal."

"Do Africans commit more crime here than the Chinese do?"

"Of course."

"Can you give me an example?"

And so it went. I dropped the conversation before too many bad feelings developed.

The following week I showed LA BAMBA, the 1987 film about Ritchie Valens, the U.S. rock star who died in a plane crash at age 17. The movie is set in the 1950s. Since the music is vintage rock and roll in the United States and parallels the beginning of rock music in China in the past few years, I thought the students would relate mostly to the music. It didn't turn out that way.

One of the primary conflicts in the movie is that between the good natured, family-oriented Ritchie, and his hard-drinking, whoring, pot-smoking brother Bob. For most of the movie Bob is characterized as half mad with jealousy that his younger brother is a success and that their mother so clearly favors Ritchie. Bob struck me as the epitome of the type the students wouldn't like for all the above reasons.

Nothing I had come to expect about the Chinese — their devotion to parents, to one another, to monogamy, and their presumed antipathy to drugs, prostitution, and drinking — would possibly indicate any sympathy for Bob. My assumptions were wrong. The juniors admired Bob for the same reasons they eventually joined the student movement then beginning to spill out onto the streets in Beijing against the government. Deep down they perceived Bob as a rebel with a cause. He stands up to his mother and to his brother. He is always assertive, never passive. He demands to be heard; he demands to be accepted as fully as Ritchie is.

In addition, my students liked Ritchie's mother because she has complete confidence in his future as a rock star, unlike Chinese mothers, who are timid and would never fight for a son's right to perform such, for the times, revolutionary music. The juniors all seem to admire U.S. competitiveness. Ritchie knew what he wanted and went for it. The juniors themselves can never be like that, they imply, although they all have very private aspirations.

They went wild when Ritchie sings, into a phone from a booth, his famous song "Donna" (the flip side of "La Bamba") to his girlfriend. They laughed merrily during the movie when the police at a rock concert get very nervous as the U.S. teenagers jump out of their seats and start to dance in the aisles. The juniors rooted for their U.S. counterparts and were glad the police were outnumbered and powerless.

LA BAMBA is not only about an art form which, for my students, has the potential of being seditious. The movie is also able to satisfy the juniors' sense of social realism. The movie shows white prejudice toward Latin Americans, and it demonstrates that if you rise too high and get too rich you may also fall. "We're stars, and stars don't fall, do they?" Buddy Holly tells Ritchie moments before their plane crashes. As much as they admire Ritchie, my students perceive a modicum of justice in his death. No one should be that rich — which is one reason they detest their own senior leaders.

When the lights went on, a few of the girls were crying. The title song of the movie played during the final credits and the juniors filed silently out, perhaps once again contrasting their rather predictable lives with the stimulations of U.S. life. A few days later their essays came in on the film. Here is a sampling:

"In America young men can freely grow. If you want to ask me which way do you like best, I think I will choose the American way. I will not treat my baby as my parents treated me. Maybe my baby will become a famous singer!"

"In America people can do what they want to do. They can find a place, singing. When they are seeing a performance they are very excited. They even dance beside their seats. I think we cannot do that in China, but in America. American young people are warm-hearted, self

confident, and their spare time is colorful."

"American young people are not conservative. They do not bother about trivialities. They have their pursuits. On the contrary, Chinese young people are not used to living night life. They always go to bed early. They have not enough activities. They also have their own pursuits, but they are confined by traditional culture and society. They act carefully, and many of these drift with the tide. They used to national songs instead of rock and roll music. They are not crazy when the singers are singing. Many of them sit there quietly as if they are sleeping."

"What interests me most is that Ritchie's mother and brother are his faithful audience. They try their best to help Ritchie. Ritchie's success is his as well as his family's. It is difficult to get support from one's family if he wants to be a popular star in China because the criteria of esteeming success is different between the two different cultures and society. The way of pursuing success is also different. I prefer the American way because it is more reasonable and it makes us feel more conscious of our existence. Above all, I conclude that the fierce competition of society makes people admire the strong, the strong strengthful music, and the strengthful people. People become strong because they have a strong desire for success."

"In the film we can see how money controls people in America in the 1950s and how people behave when facing money. Money appears everywhere and nobody can live without it. The less money Bob makes, the less love he receives, and the more money he spends on drink, drugs, and prostitutes. There is no sign of coming down from this [pursuit of money] nowadays but rather it is getting more competitive."

"Cultural anthropologists assure us that American children compete fiercely for parental love."

"In America people can do what they want to do. They can find a place, singing. When they are seeing a performance they are very excited. They even dance beside their seats. I think we cannot do that in China, but in America, American young people are warmhearted, self confident, and their spare time is colorful."

"As it comes to American culture in the 1950s, I think America must be absurd in some conditions. They are so crazy about a singer whose age is only 17. It is not necessary for them to esteem such a schoolboy."

It happened that I showed NORMA RAE, Martin Ritt's 1979 film about textile unionizing in the South, during the May student boycott. The timing, I thought, was perfect. The students would see a socially oriented film set in the United States while China was experiencing its biggest social upheaval since the Cultural Revolution. As usual, the results were not as I expected.

First I was surprised that the juniors gathered in class that Wednesday not for instruction but to hold a political discussion. They argued for a while in Chinese, and then as a class walked out in boycott. I was surprised, because none of our

students had shown any early enthusiasm for the democratic movement as it came to be called. I was even more surprised when three juniors out of the class of twenty chose to watch the film, thereby defying the rest of the class. The juniors were a tight-knit collective: they took military training together in the summer, went on class trips, partied as a class, occasionally dated among themselves, and took the same classes and teachers for four years. The shouting in class had been about the defection of the three in staying to watch NORMA RAE.

The film sympathetically focuses on the struggle to unionize black and white workers who distrust one another. It is not revolutionary, but the film shows how it is possible for the underdog to win some justice. Surely here was a film in May, 1989, Beijing college students would easily relate to. The three juniors told me they were bored by the film, preferring the more exciting and socially meaningful movies like STARMAN and CROCODILE DUNDEE. I asked Philip (Liu Li) why the film bored him. Philip was the student who, in September, said he wanted to be rich some day and believed in capitalism and in making millions. "The film is too revolutionary," was his exact reply. His observation appeared to echo the government's position that the student movement in Beijing was disruptive and was causing social disorder.

A larger paradox was becoming manifest. Showing all these movies was having a reverse effect on the students from the one I intended. I thought these films would expose both the positive and negative aspects of U.S. society and culture. The juniors and seniors would see not only the excitement, boldness, and dynamism of U.S. movies and culture, but see also our preoccupation with violence, sex, and social competitiveness. I thought I could start a dialogue about the United States American Survey should challenge the students' assumptions and stereotypes about my country, just as my assumptions had all been overturned after ten months in China.

My plans had an unanticipated effect on the juniors. Instead of seeing the United States in all its multiplicities and contradictions, my juniors saw only the profound flaws in their own society and national character. For the graduating class of 1990, China, not the United States, was the country which needed reforms and was too socially restrictive. For better or for worse, the juniors would become part of the intellectual class of a new China when they graduated.

Because they were witnessing and participating in the biggest upheaval in China since the Cultural Revolution, they felt empowered for the first time in their lives. When they wrote about the movies, they made comparisons with China. As to what directions China should take in the next ten years, this was a subject they could write about with confidence.

When the students compared U.S. films to Chinese films, they denigrated the latter without mercy. One student wrote, "Chinese films are always dull and uninteresting to see. The films cannot grasp people. So when I see Chinese films I feel tired." For them Chinese films end too predictably; the characters, like China, I suppose, undergo no real changes. The bad guy is defeated and the community wins. An individual's psychological makeup is never taken into account.

I showed my juniors E.T., which they liked as much as LA BAMBA. The movie was

so popular in fact that my sophomores got wind of it and the audio/video department head let me have a special showing. One would think that Spielberg's fantasy was just the innocent escapist movie needed to get everyone's mind off the current "disorders."

Just the opposite occurred. Eliot, the young hero in E.T., really belonged to the student movement in Beijing — or so it sounded reading the students' essays:

'Eliot is very impressive. He is a very brave, very adventuresome and courageous. Even though his mother is divorced she is still independent and strong. American children are much more independent and have much more imagination than Chinese children.'

"The American children hide E.T. from theft parents; Chinese children would never do that. He is not afraid of any adults. Eliot and his family are very rich. He has lots of toys and a color tv. The fact that Eliot had some weird toys — like transformer toys — prepared him to meet E.T. who is so ugly."

"American children can drive cars and they outsmart the police. None of these things could happen in China. We admire him and his friends who rescue E.T. from the police."

Other students called E.T. a science film and not a science fiction film. The students admired the United States' ability to imagine things, especially the future. One sophomore wrote, "Our Chinese people should learn this advantage from the Americans."

They all agreed E.T. had profound meaning. "I am obsessed by E.T.," said a student, "and also I admire the America's imagination." Children, many write, are the hope of the world. The movie was really about personal relationships and how we need peace. E.T., argued one student, "is really preparing us for the time we have to leave the earth." The scientists depicted in the movie were harshly criticized. They "have lost the childish pure. They doubt everything," observed a sophomore. The director was trying to recapture Americans' love for one another through this film because, as one student wrote, the American people are "getting colder and colder."

To some E.T. contained some serious warnings, most of which have serious political overtones. The most grave of these was described as follows:

"What strikes me most is one should live with his friends or live in his own country. Otherwise he will meet more troubles .... We can imagine what would probably happen if E.T. did not phone his home. What troubled E.T. most should teach all the Chinese students who studied in America a terrific lesson in order to let them change the ideas of living in America and never coming back."

This was the most timely and ideological comment of all. This sophomore, whose English name was Flash, was a candidate for the Communist Party. A great source of embarrassment to the government is that, of the 60,000 or more Chinese students studying abroad during the last five years, fewer than half have returned

or mean to return to China. "E.T. come home. Chinese living abroad, come home," was what I heard Flash and, possibly through him, the Communist Party saying.

Given their general acumen, I was surprised that no student made the connection between E.T. and LA BAMBA that Eliot and Ritchie Valens came from broken families and that both Eliot and Ritchie's brother stood up to their mothers. Rebelliousness counted, not the fact that their fathers were missing and that the U.S. family might be in trouble. What was important was that children and women in the United States are more independent than are their counterparts in the People's Republic. Eliot defied his mother by hiding E.T. and then by relying on his buddies and not on her. Most young Chinese would never challenge their parents, and they loved it when they saw sons talk back to their mothers on the screen.

My students admired Americans for being more expressive than they perceived themselves to be. They thought Americans said no when they meant no, spoke theft minds and took risks and, most of all, were not impressed by authority. In short, my students loved the movie characters they saw on the screen for all the characteristics they felt they lacked.

Of course the great irony was that during the months in Beijing they were seeing these films with wonder and envy, large number of young Chinese students were causing the central government to experience the early symptoms of a nervous breakdown from which they have yet to recover.

In the fall I resumed teaching English literature and writing at Ramapo. A year after we returned, I became a seminar fellow in the New Jersey Internationalizing the Curriculum Project, of which my wife was appointed co-director. My project was to internationalize the course content of College English, a combination of reading, writing, and introduction to literature, offered every term at Ramapo and, in one form or another, nearly everywhere else in the United States. I had lots of time to figure out what had happened in my classes in China which might be integrated into this ambitious statewide project.

If my intention in China had been to teach my students about life in the United States and to use feature-length films to accomplish this objective, I probably failed. Actually, I did worse: I had unwittingly reinforced all the stereotypes the Chinese college students have about the United States: most Americans live in capacious suburban homes, drive large cars, come from broken families, have great social lives, enjoy a wide variety of entertainment, can accomplish almost anything they wish, and are so free from social restraints they are able to defy the police and most adults. All these elements were evident in E.T., REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE, BACK TO THE FUTURE, and LA BAMBA — the most popular films I showed that year.

When I showed my students NORMA RAE, a film which did not conform to these fixed notions and the only film which attempted to address and relate social class differences and racism, the students were obviously unhappy and did not wish to discuss the film. THE DEFIANT ONES drew from my juniors more laughter than a serious response, and this film and CROCODILE DUNDEE almost certainly convinced them of what they already "knew": people of color in the United States, and people who are poor, are either too lazy to work or they are criminals. Only a handful of my students ever expressed sympathy for the poor and homeless in the

United States, believing that those who wish to work and succeed can; the ones who fail deserve to fail. All in all, the films I chose only confirmed in my students' minds that most North Americans were well off and far more privileged in every respect than they are.

My wife, who was teaching oral and visual communications and not U.S. or Western culture, much more realistically translated U.S. society to our students (we both taught the juniors). She had her students prepare a "video letter" to our Ramapo students back home, and they in turn were preparing to send one to Beijing.

In their tape, the Chinese students chose six topics they felt would be of most interest to their U.S. counterparts: college life (they spend 28 hours, five and a half days a week and 36 weeks a year in class); spare time (the students don't have much, but like rock music, dancing, sports, and photography); family life (they said their families were closer knit than U.S. families); the enormous growth of private companies in China (to disabuse North Americans' stereotype of China as a wholly communist country); and the problem of inflation in China (a primary cause of workers in Beijing joining the student movement). After each segment the Chinese students asked the Ramapo students to comment about these six subjects as they affected their lives in the United States. Unfortunately, by the time this video arrived at Ramapo, the army had moved against the students and various working-class neighborhoods in Beijing and so the tourist students never received a reply.

Given the events beginning in April and ending in June, the year we spent in China could hardly be considered typical of what the Western teacher experiences in a Chinese college classroom. Ironically our Chinese students probably learned more about China than they did about the United States as they contrasted their lives with those of the various characters they saw on the video monitor for almost twenty weeks. In the year of the student democratic movement, whatever I taught the juniors and seniors about the West was bound to be translated by our students into the question, "What does this say about my country, China?"

The Chinese we met, mostly college students, intellectuals, and professors — a minuscule percentage of the Chinese population — were thoroughly convinced that the United States is the paradigm of all that is democratic, socially progressive, and economically sound. Possibly nothing I might have done would have complicated, if not contradicted, this simplistic view. But I am sorry that with my heavy reliance on mainstream Hollywood movies I did not provide a wider range of perspectives. I did not offer enough material to enable the Chinese students to reach conclusions which went beyond their narrowly held, stereotypical ones of life in the United States. Surely the starting point of any global education is to open up the world, provide analytical and critical skills, and develop multi perspectives. Hollywood films hardly globalize the world for North Americans, let alone for Chinese college students who have surprisingly fixed and very positive views of this country.

At times I felt that to the extent our juniors were awestruck by the triumphs of Eliot in E.T. or Ritchie in LA BAMBA, the more they found to dislike in China. This is not what I had hoped to achieve in the People's Republic.

# International television in the U.S.

by Blanche S. Chang

from *Jump Cut*, no. 37, July 1992, pp. 50-51

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1992, 2006

*Third World Television Access to U.S. Media: Distributing Television Programs from Developing Countries in U.S. Television, New Electronic and Non-Theatrical Markets* by Claus Mueller (Friedrich Naumann Foundation, New York, 1989). 125 pp. Paperback.

The 1970s notion that international television traffic is a one-way street, running from North to South, was modified in the early 1980s to accommodate a trend toward greater South-South and regional exchanges. Now the TV flow is shifting again, as there is a small but growing number of Third World films and television productions being broadcast in the North. The United States has lagged well behind Europe in the use of Third World-produced programming. The premise of Mueller's book is that an information gap, rather than political, cultural or economic factors, causes Third World-produced material to be so scarce in the U.S. media environment.

Broadcasters can no longer justifiably cite poor technical quality or unsuitability of formats or themes as reasons to disregard productions from developing countries. The international omnipresence of video cameras, graphics and editing technology gives many Third World productions an identical "look" to those made in the North. Third World issues that perhaps 20 years ago hardly were of interest to U.S. viewers, now are a standard component of U.S. nightly newscasts — e.g., deterioration of the environment or the plight of refugees.

Thus, on both sides, the time seems right for Third World broadcasters and filmmakers to market their productions in the United States. However, Mueller notes that U.S. buyers and distributors of TV programs have little or no knowledge of sources for material from developing countries. Conversely, Third World producers are not familiar with the intricacies of the U.S. media marketplace. An additional hindrance is that no audience measurement exists of the few Third World productions that are on U.S. broadcast and cable channels. The nonprofit, New York-based Third World Television Exchange, which Mueller established in 1986, seeks to create access to U.S. media markets for TV programs from developing nations. The main activities of the Exchange are holding annual screenings of recent Third World productions, and compiling research of interest to U.S. and Third World broadcasters.

This book is one product of that research; data were generated through a variety of

methods, including a series of seminars with U.S. distributors and Third World film and television producers. I have attended some of the activities of the Exchange, and am acquainted with Mueller, who is a sociology professor at Hunter College. Funds for his research were provided by his publisher, the Friedrich Nanmann Foundation.

Much of this book's usefulness comes from the strategic knowledge it provides on the organization and operation of U.S. media systems. In a breakdown of the U.S. television industry, separate sections are devoted to the traditional broadcast networks and public television; to the new electronic media of cable, low-power television (LPTV), satellite distribution and home video; and to the non-theatrical markets of educational and institutional use of video programs. In the past decade, the plethora of new media technologies, especially cable television and home video, has shattered the once monolithic and homogeneous U.S. television audience into a mosaic of many audiences, some highly specialized. Indeed, the three U.S. broadcast networks, which ten years ago commanded at least 90% of U.S. television households, now can pull only about 60%, and that figure has been slipping a bit every year. A new low may have been reached one Saturday evening in late October, 1990, when, according to a *New York Times* report; the share of the audience controlled by the three networks fell below 50%.

The new media have lured an average of ten million viewers a night away from the big three U.S networks. While the citation of these new, small, special interest audiences brought many more opportunities to programmers and distributors, it has also made the U.S. television landscape much more complex.

Among these diverse TV audiences in the United States, Mueller points to two as being the most receptive to Third World-produced programming. The first are local television markets with communities having roots in developing nations. New York City, for example, has 1.5 million residents with origins in the Caribbean. New York has several special-interest channels, including broadcast, cable, LPTV and satellite-distributed channels, that carry non-English-language programs or programs targeted to minority groups. However, these shows draw too few viewers to warrant standard audience measurement. This virtually precludes the programs' use by larger, advertiser-supported channels, as sponsors are reluctant to invest in programs with no audience data.

In addition to minority groups, another, larger audience sector interested in programming from the Third World comprises affluent, upper middle class U.S. households, which account for 25% of the U.S. viewing audience. Mueller notes that this audience is especially receptive to nonfiction programming such as documentaries on culture or the environment. This is the audience of the highly successful U.S. cable channels, Discovery and Arts & Entertainment, which program documentary and foreign-produced material.

The interest shown by U.S. broadcasters and audiences in getting firsthand views of developing nations, as reflected in Third World-made television and feature films, may be linked to increased news coverage of these countries, Mueller suggests. As the interdependence of nations grows, themes have become universalized, with a vast number of global environmental and political problems affecting both the developed and developing world. His data from audience surveys show that productions from Nicaragua, for example, were received with greater

interest by U.S. viewers than programs from Brazil.

Additional data show audiences preferring documentaries on social issues with universal themes, such as refugees or poverty, and on nature. Mueller notes these programs require viewers to have little background knowledge of Third World history, conditions or cultural context.

The last section of the book contains a compendium of information valuable to both the Third World broadcaster and the U.S. programmer. Included are listings of organizations that are entry points into the U.S. television market, public television stations and cable networks that are interested in programs from the Third World, and sources for acquisition of and information about Third World-produced material.

French and Spanish translations of *Third World Television Access to U.S. Media* are planned. The Naumann Foundation also hopes to publish annual updated and expanded editions — clearly necessary to maintain the book's value to U.S. and Third World broadcasters. As a book that foresees steady growth in the South-North flow of television programming, it is a timely and relevant work.

# Come See the Paradise

## The color of paradise

by Robert Payne

from *Jump Cut*, no. 37, July 1992, pp. 51-55

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1992, 2006

After 45 years, Hollywood has finally made a theatrical feature about the Japanese American internment during World War II. The forced evacuation and incarceration of over 110,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry (or *Nikkei*) in prison camps — an act of legalized racism which directly violated their Fourteenth Amendment rights — remains one of the darkest chapters of United States history. But until the advent of Alan Parker's *COME SEE THE PARADISE* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1990), the U.S. film industry apparently considered this important and illuminating event to be unfit for the big screen. The dilemma of representing U.S. concentration camps is plain. This internment not only foregrounds the underlying racism of a nation whose mythos disavows racial inequality, but it also exemplifies the vulnerability of "unalienable rights" when those rights become politically inconvenient. On one level, *COME SEE THE PARADISE* stands as a courageous and somewhat subversive film simply for portraying this disturbing historical event. But what is the viewer to learn from Parker's interpretation of history?

The question is important because the United States still has difficulty confronting its lingering racial intolerance and acknowledging its shifting demographic makeup. The increasing influx of Asian immigrants into the United States and the economic rivalry with Japan have been met with increasing hostility against Asian Americans — hostility perhaps exemplified by the death of Vincent Chin, a killing which many believe to have been racially motivated.[\[1\]](#)[\[open notes in new window\]](#) Because the United States' dominant Eurocentric culture has difficulty discerning differences among its own Asian populations, issues of Japanese American representation are bound to larger Asian American issues. But, the term "Asian American" is itself Eurocentric because it is "an externally imposed label" that distinguishes some U.S. citizens from others "primarily on the basis of race rather than culture."[\[2\]](#) Still, the unique position of Parker's film begs the possibility of a uniquely Asian American perspective on this crucial moment in Japanese American history. And Parker instantly frustrates this possibility by centering his drama around an interracial love story.

If *COME SEE THE PARADISE* were only one more entry into an on-going filmic exploration of the internment, it could be welcomed without hesitation into a

cinematic exchange of issues and ideas focused on this historical event. But the internment's paucity of representation in Hollywood gives Parker's film the *de facto* status of a definitive history. In an interview with National Public Radio on 21 January 1991, Parker deflected criticism of his film by offhandedly suggesting that Japanese Americans make their own movies about the internment.

Unfortunately, the interviewer neglected to ask why no Nikkei-produced features depicting the camps predated Parker's. Many books and plays written by Japanese Americans have dramatized the internment and its unresolved consequences, but none of these has been brought to the big screen. Clearly, Hollywood would rather trust its millions to Parker, an Englishman with no direct personal connection to the camps, than encourage Japanese American filmmakers.

Although Hollywood has been slow to acknowledge the injustices of the internment, it was quick to cash in on the racist war hysteria that spawned the camps. The same year that the Nikkei were imprisoned for unproven acts of espionage, Twentieth Century Fox released LITTLE TOKYO, U.S.A. (1942), a drama which attributes "fictitious acts of betrayal" to the Japanese Americans.<sup>[3]</sup> But of course, COME SEE THE PARADISE isn't the first time that the internment has been represented audiovisually. A number of documentaries have chronicled the subject, ranging from a TV report by Walter Cronkite to more critical examinations by independent Asian American filmmakers.<sup>[4]</sup> Before Parker's film, however, John Korty's TV movie FAREWELL TO MANZANAR (broadcast by NBC in 1976) was the only popularly accessible drama depicting the camps.<sup>[5]</sup>

The few independently produced Japanese American feature films — such as Duane Kubo and Robert A. Nakamura's HITO HATA: RAISE THE BANNER (1980) — could dramatize events in direct reference to the internment, but lacked the financial resources necessary to naturalistically re-create the camps. Still, putting the prison camps on the "silver screen" was enough of a novelty for Parker's film to publicize itself by playing on the internment as a little-known footnote in U.S. history.<sup>[6]</sup>

COME SEE THE PARADISE begins in 1936. Jack McGurn (Dennis Quaid) is a labor organizer on the lam from authorities in Brooklyn. He lands in Los Angeles and takes a job as a projectionist in a Japanese movie house — "The Paradise" — in Little Tokyo, where he meets U.S.-born Lily Kawamura (Tamlyn Tomita). It's love at first sight, and the two begin an affair behind the back of Lily's large family. But when Lily's father (Sab Shimono) finds out, Jack and Lily elope to Seattle (interracial marriage being illegal in 1930s California). Five years later, Jack and Lily are settled in Seattle with a daughter, Mini (Elizabeth Gilliam), but Jack continues his labor activism in the cannery where he works. Over Lily's protests, Jack leads a demonstration at the cannery, where he is subsequently beaten by police and arrested.

When Jack doesn't come home that night, Lily feels neglected and returns to L.A. with Mini. By the time they arrive, the Japanese have already bombed Pearl Harbor. Because of their cultural ties to the new enemy, Japanese Americans throughout the West Coast are attacked as disloyal by white Americans, and Mr. Kawamura has already been arrested on vague suspicion. Lily is tearfully reconciled with her mother (Shizuko Hoshi) and welcomed back into the family. On parole from Seattle, Jack finds Lily again, and they make up. With Mr.

Kawamura gone, Lily's brothers and sisters greet Jack as a family member. Promising to return to Lily, Jack has to leave for Seattle to report for parole. But once there, he's told that his parole has been suspended and that he's being drafted.

Meanwhile, the Kawamuras, along with hundreds of other Japanese Americans, are railed off to an internment camp in the desert, where they suffer innumerable humiliations in the cramped, dusty confines. Mr. Kawamura rejoins his family in the camp, but he is too dispirited to feign a normal life. Jack occasionally visits the camp on leave from basic training. But one day, when Mr. Kawamura is ill, Jack appears unexpectedly by the bedside of his estranged father-in-law. Jack says that he has deserted the Army, believing that he can be of better use to the family in the camp. Showing Jack affinity for the first time, Mr. Kawamura tells him to return to the Army, that the best way he can help the family is to "just love Lily." Jack goes back to the Army, but he's arrested for his Brooklyn union activism and sent to jail. Sick and dejected, Mr. Kawamura commits suicide. As the war draws to a close, the family survivors are released from internment in early 1945 with the rest of the Nikkei. This story is told in flashback by Lily to a ten-year-old Mini (Caroline Junko King) as they wait in a train station for Jack's return from prison.

COME SEE THE PARADISE recognizes itself as the first feature film about the internment, thus recognizing itself as an important means of educating its audience. The dialogue and mise-en-scene drop copious facts about the United States' racist past laws forbidding native Japanese from becoming citizens or owning property, laws forbidding interracial marriage, wartime authorities singling out the Nikkei while being more lenient towards German Americans and Italian Americans, the daily humiliations of the camps, etc. The film honestly seeks to broaden the viewer's understanding of U.S. racism and its institutionalization in the past, but it does this by subscribing — perhaps unconsciously — to the institutionalized racism of Hollywood today.

Although COME SEE THE PARADISE sincerely sympathizes with the plight of the Japanese Americans, the issues raised by these characters are severely blunted by the film's focus on its Caucasian main character, Jack. While probably intended as an avenue of identification for white, "mainstream" audiences, Jack proves to be a distraction from the ethnic, cultural, and historical issues raised by the internment. As a result, these fascinating issues are reduced to an exotic, elliptical background for the familiar romance between a white leading man and his non-white love interest. Falling back on this tired cliché might have been agreeable if the love story were compelling, but instead, Parker gives his audience a superficial romance based on physical attraction and little else. Why are the two lovers so drawn to each other? Why do they bother going against the institutionalized segregationism of the time? The viewer can only answer these questions by looking off-screen.

The mainstream entertainment industry only reluctantly recognizes racial and cultural difference as a source for articulating alternative perceptions of a discriminatory society. Whenever dominant, mainstream narratives raise issues of race, they usually treat Western racism as a transient aberration in an otherwise egalitarian civilization. Perceptions of the West as inherently racist (for example, portraying U.S. democracy as dependent on the neocolonial exploitation of Third World countries) are traditionally discredited. In the case of Hollywood cinema,

narratives of racial issues frequently remain circumscribed within the spectator's identification with a Caucasian lead (or with a Western surrogate, including Hollywood's motion-picture apparatus). Parker employed this strategy in his previous film, *MISSISSIPPI BURNING* (1988), which portrayed white FBI agents as heroes of the Civil Rights movement. *DANCES WITH WOLVES*, *THE LONG WALK HOME*, and *COME SEE THE PARADISE* are only three of the most recent examples of refracting, and thereby distorting, U.S. racial and cultural history by focusing on a white main character.

The entertainment industry continues the dominance of the white protagonist by insisting that audiences won't usually pay to see actors of color in leading roles, despite notable examples to the contrary. Jack is the main character of *COME SEE THE PARADISE* only because Hollywood caters to a racially discriminatory viewer.

But much more fascinating than either Jack or Lily is the character of Lily's brother, Charlie (Stan Egi), whose imprisoned bitterness dramatically transforms him from a contented U.S. citizen to a defiant Japanese nationalist. An engrossing character like Charlie, growing out of a specifically Japanese American context, has seldom been seen in the U.S. cinema (despite the efforts of several Asian American filmmakers to bring John Okada's 1957 novel *No-No Boy* to the screen). Still, *COME SEE THE PARADISE* relegates Charlie's tantalizing transformation to the obscurity of the background. The film eurocentrically assumes that its audience will find the familiar romantic dilemmas of the white male lead more interesting than the rare, penetrating glimpse into the United States' past that Charlie might have provided had he been a leading character.

The film appears to mitigate its own eurocentrism by structuring its narrative as Lily's flashback. Because Lily narrates the story in voice over to ten-year-old Mini, Parker seems to offer a Japanese American point of view by suggesting Lily as the film's controlling voice. But the camera's dominating visual narrative splits off from Lily's voice over, most dramatically in the scene where Jack and Lily first make love. The camera dwells on the eroticism of Lily's near-naked body, which visually obscures Jack's nude torso. The camera, then, sides with the spectator aroused by (Asian) female nudity, rather than representing Lily's perspective by identifying with her arousal by Jack. The film humorously widens the divergence between the camera's visual narrative and the woman's aural narrative when Mini (who is too young to hear about her parents' sex lives) is told by Lily that, rather than making love, she and Jack "stayed up all night talking." While Lily's narrative conceals eroticism, the camera's overriding narrative lingers over it. Lily does not have the controlling voice after all.

Furthermore, this meticulously researched film elides the issue of legalized racism with an egregious historical lie. The Kawamuras and the other Nikkei are finally freed from camp when, according to Lily's voice over, the United States Supreme Court found the internment unconstitutional. So, the film teaches us that U.S. justice stands by the underdog. In the end, the benevolent U.S. legal system bestows rights upon the minorities. The white viewer may now be comfortably absolved of any responsibility for the legacy of U.S. racism. Unfortunately, the historical record teaches a different lesson. Not only did the Supreme Court uphold the constitutionality of the internment, but its decision on the matter, *Korematsu v. the United States* (1944), was used to defend the Nazi death camps during the

Nuremberg Tribunal.[7]

While publicizing the film's opening, Parker remarked that his primary interest in making the film wasn't to give a history lesson, but to tell a specifically interracial love story. Yet, this seems strange because the film dramatizes little conflict that Jack and Lily face as a couple; for instance, they aren't portrayed as an interracial Romeo and Juliet. Lily's father is the greatest obstacle to their romance, but he is kept on the periphery of the dramatic action. After a subdued scene in which Jack tries to reason with Mr. Kawamura, the lovers simply avoid confronting him by eloping. And Mr. Kawamura's misgivings about the marriage are resolved off-screen, an intriguing change in character which isn't revealed until the sickbed scene. Furthermore, in the only scene where Jack and Lily go out in public as an interracial couple — they crash a gala wedding after their own modest nuptials — race never becomes an issue. The only moment in the film where Jack dramatically confronts racism is when he argues with a department-store Santa Claus who won't let Mini sit on his knee. So, although interracial issues color the film's historical background, these issues are rarely foregrounded by the characters.

Rather than probing interracial conflicts, Parker observes the cultural tensions between Jack and Lily. According to his interviews and production notes (included in the press kit for the film), Parker views Jack's hot-headed union activism as a product of his Irish American upbringing, while Lily's culture has taught her a sense of resignation. The film dramatizes this cultural clash when Lily argues with an angry Jack to give up his labor activism:

LILY: You can't spit against heaven, Jack.  
JACK: Don't give me that Japanese shit.

By the film's conclusion, the lovers' personalities have partially rubbed off on each other: Jack has become more fatalistic as Lily learns to be more vocal about her anger. Or as Parker described the film in a December 1990 interview on ENTERTAINMENT TONIGHT: "In a way, it's [Lily] expressing her Americanness and leaving behind a little bit of her Japanese [culture]."

So, as his character "develops," the aggressive Jack, moved by Mr. Kawamura's sickbed advice, becomes willing to submissively turn himself over to the Army after going A.W.O.L.. Lily, on the other hand, absorbs enough of Jack's aggressiveness to shout at the camp administrators, but there's no dramatic consequence to this scene: Lily has changed, but not significantly. In the end, Jack's past as a union organizer, and not the camps, stands between the couple and must be "resolved" before they can get back together.

Parker's interracial romance seems to advocate Jack's fatalistic abandonment of his union ideals; in this way, the film serves as little more than a parable against political activism. This interpretation is supported by the film's oblique portrayal of Charlie's pro-Japanese revolt in the camp, an event whose organizational roots are only implied and whose results only get Charlie "repatriated" (Lily's word) to Japan, a country he's never visited before. Charlie's futile activism, then, merely confirms his "foreignness."

But the film's implicit warning against political action stands in sharp contrast to an historical event which is never acknowledged on-screen: the redress and

reparations movement. In 1988, after a decade of marches, rallies, demonstrations, and organization, Japanese-American political activists "spit against heaven" by forcing the federal government to recognize the gross injustices it inflicted upon the Nikkei during World War II. The Civil Liberties Act of 1988 was a direct result of their agitation. The law mandated an official apology and a check for \$20,000 in reparations to each of the 60,000 camp survivors. So, while COME SEE THE PARADISE eurocentrically views the internment as a learning ground of passive resignation, to many Nikkei off-screen, the camp experience has provided a unique channel for empowerment and for the crystallization of a Japanese American identity.

However, the inability or unwillingness of COME SEE THE PARADISE to recognize the internment's broader, less complacent implications seems to reflect a general conservative backlash against ethnic consciousness in the United States. In his NPR interview, Parker responded to Japanese Americans' unfavorable criticism of his film by attributing such criticism to "inverse discrimination." With one vaguely defined phrase, Parker portrayed himself as the underdog in a struggle against a self-proclaimed "politically correct" ideology, one in which the sensitivities of nonwhites oppress established Eurocentric traditions.

"Reverse discrimination" and "political correctness" are becoming increasingly popular rallying cries of conservatives to dismiss the grievances of people of color. [8] In the case of the mainstream theatre, when Actors' Equity, responding to protests from its Asian-American constituents, prevented the musical MISS SAIGON from casting its ostensibly Asian lead role with a white actor, the union's action was condemned by the show's producer and much of the press as "racist" without examining Broadway's long history of anti-Asian discrimination.[9] However, "inverse discrimination" must assume that absolute racial equality is a practiced reality in U.S. society; only then could people of color effectively discriminate against the white power structure. Clearly, the concept of "inverse discrimination" serves as a tool to help whites maintain their dominance and Parker's subscription to it questions his intentions of portraying the internment in the first place.

But as of this writing, Parker's film has quickly vanished from the movie houses and appears to be a financial disappointment. If the past is anything to go by, rather than being viewed as a reflection of the film's inherent weaknesses, the fiscal failure of COME SEE THE PARADISE will only be used by Hollywood to confirm its convenient belief that movies with Asian American subject matter are unmarketable. This will probably mean that, for the foreseeable future, Hollywood won't finance any more mainstream movies that seriously investigate the internment or other Asian American issues (although Hollywood currently plans to revive the old ethnic stereotypes of Charlie Chan and Mr. Moto). But even if the film's failure helps perpetuate the low profile of Asian Americans in mainstream culture, it will more than likely have no negative impact on the career of either Alan Parker or Dennis Quaid. Japanese American feature films will probably continue relying on PBS as the main source of funding and exhibition — as did Michael Toshiyuki Uno's THE WASH (1988) and Emiko Omori's HOT SUMMER WINDS (1991) — but this will not guarantee attractive budgets, theatrical releases, or receptive audiences.

If it seriously wants to develop its viewers' openness to Asian American subject matter, Hollywood will have to develop films that spring from Asian American perspectives and that cultivate Asian American creative talent, rather than just distorting and exploiting these for the advancement of established white careers. Only with greater Asian American involvement in and control of the creative process can Asian American representation in Hollywood more accurately reflect a multicultural society. COME SEE THE PARADISE stands as a negative example: in attempting to make bitter Japanese American issues palatable to a white audience, Hollywood has once again contributed to their further misunderstanding and further marginalization.

## NOTES

1. This is the subject of Christine Choy and Renée Tajima's 1988 documentary, WHO KILLED VINCENT CHIN?
2. Elaine H. Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), p. xii.
3. I haven't seen LITTLE TOKYO, U.S.A., but I draw my description from Larry Langman and David Ebner, *An Encyclopedia of American Spy Films* (New York: Garland, 1990), p.219. The film was written by George Bricker and directed by Otto Brower. Preston Foster and Brenda Joyce headed the cast.
4. For an informative catalogue of shorts and documentaries about the internment and other Asian American subjects, see Renée Tajima, ed., *The Anthology of Asian Pacific American Film and Video* (New York: Film News Now Foundation, 1985).
5. But this TV movie raises its own troubling issues of eurocentrism. See Raymond Okamura, "FAREWELL TO MANZANAR: A Case of Subliminal Racism," in *Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America*, ed. Emma Gee (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1976), pp. 280-83. Okamura also mentions a 1945 serial, ESCAPE FROM MANZANAR, but I've been unable to find any more information about this film. For the record, Hollywood also passingly mentioned the internment in Robert Pirosh's GO FOR BROKE! (MGM, 1951), John Sturges' BAD DAY AT BLACK ROCK (MGM, 1954), and Etienne Périer's BRIDGE TO THE SUN (MGM, 1961). And George McCowan's TV movie IF TOMORROW COMES (ABC, 1971) examined the post-Pearl Harbor racism that led to the camps.
6. For example, ENTERTAINMENT TONIGHT publicized Parker's film by treating the internment as a late-breaking news story.
7. The day the Supreme Court handed down *Korematsu*, it also handed down another decision, *Ex parte Mitsuye Endo*. The second decision ruled that "loyal" Americans couldn't be detained against their will. But *Endo*'s labyrinthine logic left the internment's constitutionality intact. See Michi Weglyn, *Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps* (New York: Morrow, 1976), esp. p. 75.
8. For example, in a vindictive cover story, *Newsweek* portrayed cultural consciousness in the universities as the "new McCarthyism." See Jerry Adler et al., "Taking Offense," *Newsweek* 24 December 1990, pp. 48 ff.

9. See Michael Omi's analysis of the MISS SAIGON controversy and neo-conservatism, "The Issue Is About Race and Racism," *Hokubei Mainichi* (San Francisco), 25 September 1990, p. 2.

---

[To top](#)   [Current issue](#)   [Archived essays](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)

# *Family Gathering* Release from emotional internment

by Cassandra Van Buren

from *Jump Cut*, no. 37, July 1992, pp. 65-63

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1992, 2006

FAMILY GATHERING (1988) is a personal documentary made by Japanese-North American filmmaker Lise Yasui about her family's experience of imprisonment by the United States government during World War II. In this article I discuss some methods Yasui uses in the construction of her film to maintain its specificity without lessening its message regarding the injustice and inhumanity of the internment process. By focusing her film upon her own and her family's experience, Yasui leaves ample room for other Japanese-North Americans to speak of their own experiences.

Mediamakers belonging to groups disenfranchised by dominant culture often feel compelled to try to "say it all" for their particular group. This pressure can be traced to the fact that, because media opportunities for the disempowered are limited,

"each film text is burdened with an inordinate pressure to be 'representative' and to act, like a delegate does, as a statement that 'speaks' for...communities as a whole" (Julien & Mercer, 1988, p. 2).

The community in question may not get another chance to be heard, for dominant culture prefers to relegate minority groups to a simplistically conceived Other. In this way, the experiences of people of color, women, lesbians and gays, and the poor can be quickly categorized and immediately dismissed as peripheral to what is of true importance. To concede that a diversity of realities exists means that dominant culture must relinquish its position as the universal reality.

Many minority (in terms of power) mediamakers recognize the trap of trying to speak for their entire community. If dominant culture oppresses a group by allowing it a merely one-dimensional status, it is not "progressive" for a group member to similarly construct another one-dimensional representation, albeit a better informed one. Such attempts at representation only serve to deny individual subjectivity and diversity of experience within the group and "return the speaking subject to the ideologically appointed place of the stereotype — that all [people of color] are the same" (Julien & Mercer, 1988, p. 5). To try to speak for all within one's group asks for instant and harsh criticism from one's own community

regarding the presumptuous nature of the project.

The primary way in which Yasui accomplishes this specificity is to present the film's "story" in terms of her own family's experiences. She does not include representations of anyone else's experience of the internment camps (except use of newsreel footage; even then her voiceover accompanies the visuals). In addition, she narrates the piece with her own voice, blending in the voices of family members. The artist "owns" her voice through the use of personal pronouns such as I, us, we, our, my. The viewer is aware of to whom the voices belong, thus avoiding any illusion of an omniscient source of information as is the case in Voice of God narration. The use of personal narration is a tremendously powerful political choice:

"Personal narratives of non-dominant social groups are often particularly effective sources of counter-hegemonic insight because they expose the viewpoint embedded in dominant ideology as particularist rather than universal, and because they reveal the reality of a life that defies or contradicts the rules. Women's personal narratives can thus often reveal the rules of... domination even as they record rebellion against them" (Personal Narratives Group. 1989, p. 7).

Certainly one of the rules of dominant culture which Yasui defies is the stereotype of the submissive Asian woman. By making this film, which explicitly criticizes her government's inhumanity and racism towards Japanese-North Americans, Yasui overturns the stereotype of submission handily.

This personalization also strengthens the involvement of the viewer in the project of the filmmaker, namely the exposure of the horrendous injustice of the evacuation, because the internment is shown in terms of its impact on people, rather than merely in terms of its function in the U. S. government's war machine. The feelings and emotions of both the documentarist and her family members course through the images and narration, bringing the impact to the viewer on a gut level, a level which is difficult to dismiss once the "show" is over.

Lise Yasui was raised in Pennsylvania. After earning an M.F.A. in Radio-Television-Film at Temple University, she now works as an independent media consultant in the Philadelphia area. Yasui produced her Academy Award-nominated documentary *FAMILY GATHERING* in 1988. The hour-long version<sup>[1]</sup> of the film, co-directed by Yasui and Ann Tegnell, aired on public television across the United States. I use this version for my analysis, rather than the 30-minute version available through New Day Films, because the longer version provides a much richer and more detailed exploration of Yasui's filmic journey.

Yasui structures her personal documentary *FAMILY GATHERING* as the story of her own investigation of the Yasui family's history, framed by her *sansei* (third-generation Japanese-North American) sensibility. Because her grandparents, Masuo and Shidzuyo Yasui, are dead, she can only gain information about their lives through the *nisei* (second-generation) members of the family. In the film, images from 8-millimeter home movies made by her father, Robert Shu Yasui, during her childhood represent the version of family history her parents want her to know and remember. Yasui remarks in the film that Robert always told her stories which painted a rosy picture of the family's past. Likewise, when she

interviews Robert's siblings for the film, they, too, relate only pleasant family tales. Soon, as Yasui says in her narration, "There came a time when nostalgia wasn't enough. Decades were missing from our history, and none more so than the war years." This recognition of the gaps in her family history prompts her to read voraciously about Japanese-North American history. Once she has a greater general understanding of her peoples' history, she returns to interview the family's *nisei* with a clearer idea of what she's looking for in their answers.

Using old family photographs and letters, newspaper clippings, newsreel footage[2], and interviews with her aunt, uncles, and father, Yasui carefully weaves a more complete and multifaceted vision of her family history. The filmmaker delineates the circumstances of her grandparents' emigration from Japan and their settlement in Hood River, Oregon; their establishment of a family of nine children and very successful orchard business; and their dedication to serving other members of the local Japanese-North American community. In Yasui's words: "Through my father's stories, I knew [my grandfather] as a patriotic American, and a self-made man."

Yasui's interviews subvert this halcyon picture as she reveals that when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor during World War II, her grandfather Masuo was considered a threat to national security by the U. S. government because of his extensive work within the Japanese-North American community. He was arrested and taken away, and for weeks the family did not know what had happened to him. Within months, much of the rest of the family was interned, along with many other Japanese-North Americans on the West Coast. When Masuo was released several months after the Japanese had surrendered, most of his 600 acres of orchards had been sold, as had the family home. White citizens of the town placed newspaper ads warning Japanese-North Americans that for their own safety, they should not return to Hood River. White neighbors believed that because of the length of his imprisonment, Masuo must have really been a spy. The pain of being suspected and shunned by the white community led to depression and finally suicide within ten years of his release from internment. Yasui notes that it took her father 28 years to reveal this family tragedy to her.

The topic focused upon in FAMILY GATHERING is the internment of Japanese-North Americans and the effects of this tremendous upheaval on the people thus imprisoned. It is therefore useful to provide a brief history of that era of North American history from the perspectives of people in the community of Japanese immigrants.

During World War II, two months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on the island of Oahu, Hawaii, in 1941, United States President Franklin Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which called for the incarceration of most of the population of West Coast Japanese-North Americans (Aptheker, 1989, p. 191). Canada, allied in war with the United States, issued a similar order for evacuation of its West Coast Japanese. The incarceration of people of Japanese ancestry was deemed necessary to protect "national security;" these people were seen as potential spies of the Japanese government.

The United States had ten poorly constructed internment camps at the ready: Poston and Gila River, Arizona; Denson and Rohwer, Arkansas; Manzanar and Tule Lake, California; Amache, Colorado; Minidoka, Idaho; Topaz, Utah; and

Heart Mountain, Wyoming. The evacuees were given seven days to dispose of property and material belongings and report to an assembly point, where they were searched, processed, and forced onto trains and buses for the trip to concentration camps. Since they could bring to the camps only what they could physically carry, families sold cherished possessions and hard-earned property for pittances to mostly white U. S. buyers. Mine Okubo, a Japanese-North American artist, says

"We were in shock. You'd be in shock. You'd be bewildered. You'd be humiliated. You can't believe this is happening to you. To think this could happen in the United States. We were citizens. We did nothing. It was only because of our race. They did nothing to the Italians and Germans." (Okubo, cited in Gesensway & Roseman, 1987, p. 66)

The camps were surrounded by barbed wire fences, even though they were usually in the middle of vast deserts; armed guards patrolled internees from imposing watchtowers. Construction of the camps was so poor that prisoners faced bitterly cold winters with little protection from the elements. Letters were censored by the government. The greater the perceived risk of individual internees, the longer their period of imprisonment. For instance, in the case Yasui's grandfather Masuo, his (erroneously) perceived spy potential was so great that he was not released until 5 months after the surrender of Japan.

After the end of the war, Japanese-North Americans tried to regain a semblances of their lives before the evacuation, but the scars of the internment remained. There is a marked unwillingness among many of the survivors to discuss those years with their children and grandchildren, a reticence which frustrates many subsequent generations of Japanese-North Americans. For instance, in the introduction of her book *Shedding Silences: Poetry and Prose*, Janice Mirikitani (cited in Aptheker, 1989, p. 232) notes that her mother kept silent for 40 years about her experience of internment. Hiroko Yamano's poem "My Mother's Stories" takes the poet's mother's perspective regarding why she wishes to remain silent about her painful memories (Yamano, cited in Aptheker, 1989, p. 31). Akemi Kikumura was barred from her mother's "forbidden' stories" until she decided to write her mother's life history (Kikumura, 1981, p.1). She is quick to point out, however, that readers must realize that what is included in her book is what her mother chose to tell her about her past (Kikumura, 1981, p. 15). Similarly, Jewish filmmakers Thomas Friedman and Owen Shapiro note that children of survivors of the Jewish Holocaust "don't always learn of the Holocaust from their parents" (1989).

The silence of internment survivors corresponds to a Japanese cultural expression which speaks to an attitude which in some cases manifests itself in letting unpleasant and/or traumatic memories go: *Shikataganai*. Mitsuye Yamada (1981b) writes in her essay "Invisibility Is an Unnatural Disaster,"

"The Japanese have an all-purpose expression in their language for this attitude of resigned acceptance: 'Shikataganai.' 'It can't be helped.' 'There's nothing I can do about it.' It is said with the shrug of the shoulders and tone of finality." (pp. 39-40)

Yamada recognizes that the governments perpetrating the internment knew of the tendency among Japanese to resignedly accept fate, thus expecting Japanese-North Americans to do as ordered, quietly. Other than the few who resisted, most people

unwillingly did as expected. Their loyalty to their chosen country was at stake; if they resisted, they risked the appearance of disloyalty. Similarly, Valerie Matsumoto (1984/1989, p. 191) writes,

"*Shikata ga nai*. 'it can't be helped,' the implication being that the situation must be endured. The phrase lingered on many lips when the Issei, Nisei, and the young Sansei prepared for the move"

to internment camps. (The *issei* are first generation immigrants, born in Japan). Clearly, the pain and humiliation suffered by internees is beyond measure. Trying to put such tremendous trauma out of mind seems a reasonable and effective mechanism of survival.

For many *nisei* and *sansei* Japanese-North American women seeking to learn about themselves through knowing their mothers and grandmothers, this silence is devastating. In her essay "Asian Pacific American Women and Feminism," *nisei* Mitsuye Yamada (1981a, p. 74) writes,

"[I] have come to know who I am through understanding the nature of my mother's experience; I have come to see the connections in our lives as well as the lives of many women like us."

And later,

"My politics as a woman are deeply rooted in my immigrant parent's (sic) and my own past" (Yamada, 1981a, p. 74).

It is largely because *nisei* and *sansei* Japanese-North Americans have insisted upon learning family history that the camp stories have been revealed.

#### PERSONAL TONE ALLOWS COMPLEXITY

In the study guide for FAMILY GATHERING (Yasui, p. 8) provided by New Day Films, Yasui writes that

"no documentary is without a point of view, a position. I did not want to make a 'traditional' documentary which might give the impression of a definitive statement about the internment. No film can be completely representative."

Yasui wishes to circumvent the codes of conventional documentary in order to avoid the appearance of speaking for everyone in her community. To effectively prevent the possibility of the viewer assuming that one subgroup's experience encompasses the experience of all others in the group, Yasui employs several devices which give her film remarkable specificity. Unlike conventional documentaries, Yasui immediately makes it clear that she is the *auteur* of this film, that it is her voice which speaks on the soundtrack, and that it is her quest for family history which gives the film its form and content. Therefore, there is no mystery surrounding the intent of the documentary or the ways in which it may be biased.

Yasui does her own voice-over narration, which she delivers in the first person. The narration distinguishes the film from traditional documentary, which would likely

employ authoritarian Voice of God narration to accompany a distanced historical overview of World War II, complete with footage of dignitaries' speeches and marching troops. From the first spoken line in FAMILY GATHERING, "This is my grandfather, Masuo Yasui" (the accompanying visual is an aged photograph of a Japanese man), Yasui establishes the film as a strictly personal and very compelling story. The feeling I get as a viewer is that Yasui is a friend; we sit in her living room as she shows me her photo albums and explains her history. This intimacy is furthered by Yasui's willingness to include her own feelings and thought process in the text of the narration. This intimacy does not exclude complexities within the film, however; in fact, the personal tone opens up multiple levels of reading. Spectators have several levels of discourse to ponder. First, the information about the Yasui family; then, Yasui's journey through the investigation; and lastly, the viewer's own response to the first two levels.

Yasui candidly discusses in the film how, as a child, she thought the only difference between herself and her mother's (who is white) side of the family was her Japanese name, and her impression that her West Coast relatives were "the ones who looked so Oriental." Here Yasui establishes that she had not previously identified herself with Japanese-North American culture. This possibly explains her position as a documentarist who is an "insider" because she belongs to the Yasui family, yet because she was not raised within the Japanese-North American culture, she's also an "outsider," who can use her own process of investigation to frame the uncovering of information for the viewer of the film.

Yasui cannot speak Japanese, which cuts her off from a certain level of communication with the Yasui *nisei* and the *issei* friends of the family whom she goes to for information. Family members give more complete explanations to Yasui than perhaps they would if their own children were doing the interviews. Perhaps it is precisely because Yasui has been outside their experience of Japanese-North American culture that the family's answers to her questions are so descriptive. They realize her status as one who does not know, and take great pains to explain the events and the dynamics of the events carefully to her.

Yasui's position as an insider, and a family member, among those she interviews is evident. Characteristically, people (who are not actors) appearing in documentaries are very ill at ease and self-conscious about being filmed because they are simply unused to appearing before the camera. Furthermore, if the director and crew of the film are strangers, people are likely to distrust that the film crew will represent them in an acceptable way. In addition, increasingly people are aware of the ability of the film crew to edit what they say and distort their original meanings. That Yasui is trusted by the people she interviews is obvious. Friends of the family like Mrs. Yamaki, who was Shidzuyo Yasui's *ikebana* (flower arranging) and tea ceremony student, and Hannah Endo, who shows Uncle Tsuyoshi and the camera crew around her garden, are quite at ease in front of Yasui's camera and in the face of her questions. The high comfort level of these people could be a consequence of two factors: first, that Yasui is a Japanese-North American woman whose roots are in Hood River, and second, that someone with a familiar face, local resident Uncle Tsuyoshi Yasui, is escorting her around town, serving as a liaison and interpreter between filmmaker and interview subjects.

Family members also appear remarkably comfortable, speaking genuinely and

frankly from the heart in this film. The family's ease may be in part due to the family's being used to Robert's constantly filming them in years past: they are accustomed to seeing and trusting a Yasui on the other side of the camera. The fact that Yasui is their niece, one of their own, seems to allow them to fully explain their thoughts and feelings about their childhoods in the camps. For instance, Uncle Homer Yasui candidly recalls his two most vivid memories of the day the family was evacuated. First, that his white school friend, Fish Foster, cut school to see Homer and the family off at the train station, which impressed Homer since to do so meant taking a great risk. Homer's second most vivid memory is how sad he was about his *Obasan* (aunt) crying bitterly over having to leave her new home in Hood River after living in the United States only 12 years or so. Homer's own position and feelings as a child about to lose all things familiar remain undisclosed. This child-like concern for others in the face of the severe trauma he himself faces is incredibly poignant.

Family members tell their stories in the form of conversations with Yasui, a device which deepens the intimacy of the film. The settings are usually softly lit living rooms, with the relatives sitting on couches. The shots are framed in medium close-ups, effectively capturing any slight changes in facial expressions. The relatives include references in their dialogue which emphasize that these interviews take place in the context of a conversation between relatives. For instance, Aunt Yuka says, "But you see, Lise, I had been a part of all of this picture. I knew what was [Masuo's] problem." Uncle Min says,

"You have to remember, Use, that you know, having been born in this country, having gone to school, and believing in the Constitution, and on top of that taking law and hopefully understanding what the law in the country was, and believing that the Constitutional guarantees were indeed meant for *all* citizens, I just couldn't understand why there should be a distinction between citizens on the basis of parentage or ancestry."

To illustrate the way in which she was introduced to Japanese-North American Hood River residents by her Uncle Tsuyoshi, Yasui includes a scene shot from the passenger side of the inside of his car. He is stopped at a house, leaning out the car window talking to an elderly man: "Lise's here filming a kind of a family documentary." At one point, in another scene where Tsuyoshi interprets his conversation with Mrs. Yamaki for Yasui, the pair reach a pause in the conversation and turn to the camera and Yasui. Tsuyoshi says, "OK, you got all that?" In these scenes, which are peppered throughout the documentary, the viewer is reminded of Yasui's voice and presence within the film.

Yasui occasionally includes her own questions on the soundtrack in the interview scenes, just often enough to remind the viewer that these people talking in the film are in fact responding to questions posed by the filmmaker, questions which serve to shape the form of the film. "What'd I miss?" she asks when Uncle Tsuyoshi is speaking at length in Japanese with Hannah Endo. The elders laugh, looking off to the left of the camera, ostensibly where Yasui is standing, and Tsuyoshi says, "Nothing." Yasui questions her father about the Japanese surrender in World War II: "Did you celebrate?" Robert replies, smiling, "Well, of course I celebrated. I was absolutely ecstatic." Another time she asks, "Uncle Homer, was there a period

when you really did have that classic All-American kind of boyhood? Or is that a myth?" Homer answers,

"Well, of course we did! Sure, we ate Wheaties, we drank Ovaltine, and yes, we went hunting and fishing. I mean all that is true, the good part of our lives, and most people remember the good parts. They don't want to tell you their bad stories."

Here Homer verbalizes and validates Yasui's experience of the common unwillingness among many survivors of the camps to dwell on parts of their lives they deem unpleasant.

## CONSTRUCTION OF MEMORY, CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

At the beginning of the film, Yasui relates a favorite childhood memory about her grandparents: they come to visit, and Yasui stays up late, listening to her grandfather talk. Periodically, he looks at Yasui and smiles. However, this memory proves to be fiction. Yasui says,

"Later, I learned that my grandparents never made such a visit, that I never met my grandfather at all. The memory was one I'd made up, a creation drawn from all the stories I'd heard and the images on my father's home movies."

Thus she introduces the idea that memory can be fabricated, made up of a patchwork of events and feelings which may or may not correspond to what actually happened. This comes up again in terms of Robert editing family history for his children. This revision of history was so effective that in Yasui's case, she grew up with only limited understanding of her family's experience of incarceration and the lasting trauma (culminating for Masuo in suicide) associated with the camps.

Given the way she calls attention to the memories she fabricated for herself, as a viewer I feel challenged to examine the re-presentation of the Yasui family she constructs in the film, as well as her re-presentation of herself. Throughout the documentary, Yasui develops for herself, via her voice-over narration, the persona of an increasingly curious and perseverant woman. The more she senses that secrets are being kept from her, the harder she looks for answers. The introductory narration goes, "What my father didn't tell me was that in 1941, five days after Pearl Harbor, my grandfather was arrested and taken away by the FBI. When I discovered this, I wondered what else I didn't know." When she speaks of asking Robert about the family's activities during the war years, she says he would "change the subject, or say nothing at all. The less he said, the more I wanted to know." The viewer hears her realize what is being continually left out of the stories: Difficulty. She knows that in everyone's life, people experience struggle of one kind or another, and that struggle was conspicuously absent in the family history. When Tsuyoshi tells her that she's missed "nothing" in his extended Japanese-language conversation with Hannah Endo, she worries out loud, "I felt frozen behind the camera, afraid to ask questions that might be upsetting. I'd inherited my father's protectiveness of the past."

Yasui's narration is so powerful that it enables visually interesting use of countless

black and white photographs. Using the notion that film's best use is to capture motion, the periods in which still photographs are used could be considered the weakest moments of the film in terms of visual interest. In these instances especially, and indeed throughout the entire film, the narration is the most compelling component, providing the most information both about the history of the family and about Yasui herself.

Perhaps the most intimate moment in the film is the point at which Yasui speaks of her reaction upon learning that her grandfather committed suicide. The images she uses are old home movies of Masuo and Shidzuyo standing outdoors and looking at a United States flag; the two of them standing outdoors, Masuo holding Yasui's older brother as an infant; and a slow-motion take of a close-up of Masuo and the boy. The narration:

"A year after I started this film my father told me the following story, and his silences began to make sense. The trust and respect my grandfather worked so hard for disappeared with Pearl Harbor. For many former friends and neighbors, the length of his sentence was proof that he'd been disloyal to his country. As my grandfather grew older, he got anxious and fearful, always worried that the FBI was coming once again to arrest him. After too many years of suffering these fears, my grandfather committed suicide at the age of 71. It took my father 28 years to tell me this."

During the last two sentences, the image of Masuo and the boy freezes, then cuts to black. This sudden lack of visual movement and subsequent blackout fonts the viewer to focus on Yasui's words; it is as if what she is saying is so powerfully painful that the image is rendered immobile. A few minutes later in the documentary, Yasui returns to the moment Robert revealed the secret of Masuo's death:

"The night my father told me about my grandfather's suicide, we were alone in the kitchen. I was asking about my grandfather's life after the war, when my dad suddenly grew quiet and said, 'Don't you know how he died?' And when he said that, somehow I knew. I cried because I could see my father's pain. And I cried because in that instant my grandfather seemed more real to me than ever before."

It is precisely because Robert withheld information about Masuo's suicide for so many years that Yasui understands the magnitude of his pain, and finally understands his evasions and silences. He further explains to Yasui:

"I think this is all part of some of the very painful things that we tend to not discuss. It's the same psychological reason that the second generation, the *nisei*, didn't talk about the evacuation; and if you remember, we did not discuss it with you. It was perhaps partly a feeling that it was past, it was done with, it was an unpleasant time of our lives and it's past. Let's get on with life."

He could be speaking for much of the population of survivors of internment camps. The unwillingness to discuss camp experiences and other unpleasant periods in life is echoed in several written records and artistic pieces by Japanese-North

Americans. In the Yasui family, the *nisei* respected Robert's wish that his children be protected from the trauma of the camps, and about the circumstances of Masuo's death. *Shikataganai*. It is this collective silence which actually spurred Yasui on in pursuit of the rest of the story. It must also be noted that Yasui's status as a *sansei* member of the family allows her the emotional distance from the trauma associated with the camps necessary to pursue the topic. Where her parents' generation of immigrants has worked hard to assimilate into U. S. culture, she conversely is in the position of trying to rediscover her Japanese heritage and seek out the cultural influences which have affected her grandparents, father, and other Japanese relatives.

## FORM AND STRUCTURE

The structure of the film is elliptical. Rather than unfolding the "events" of the film in a linear fashion, for example according to the chronology of the war, the events are revealed in accordance with Yasui's own process of investigation. This process includes false starts; backtracking to pick up what was originally overlooked; re-evaluation, and, ultimately, progression. By no means is the process efficient, clean, or easy. First, Yasui travels to Hood River to interview her relatives, and finds that they consistently leave out sections of family history. Sensing their reluctance, she simply departs, planning to do outside research of her own.

"I read everything I could about Japanese-Americans, and scoured old family scrapbooks and albums. Together they told a very different story than what I'd heard before. There were more relatives to talk to. This time I had a better idea of what I was looking for."

Yasui resumes her interviews, this time asking the *nisei* pointed questions about their lives during World War II. Her relatives answer frankly, relating detailed stories of their experiences of arrest and internment during the war. It is in this second round of questions that Robert tells her of Masuo's suicide. Rather than using this climactic moment to signal the end of the documentary, it serves as a starting point for the discussion of Masuo's quite productive life after his release from the internment camp. Time in the film is not organized strictly chronologically; instead it flows according to Yasui's own sense of how the story must be told.

I find this elliptical structure, taken along with the content of the film, compelling. Yasui incorporates her own elliptical process of making this documentary into the structure of the film, giving it a self-reflexivity which makes the viewer aware of her experience and opening up another level of meaning. Furthermore, Yasui's aunt, uncles, and father have come through cycles in terms of understanding their unjust internment; first, some chose to downplay it with their children, then with the advent of Yasui's documentary they begin to talk more about it, along with their father's suicide.

The way in which Yasui frequently comes back around to the specific conversation with Robert about Masuo's suicide is a striking example of the cyclical nature of the film. She first alludes to Masuo's wrongful internment in the introductory narration of the film, then leaves the subject untouched for nearly half the duration of the documentary. It is about three-quarters of the way through the film that she weaves her bit of narration mentioned earlier, in which she relates the climactic

conversation with Robert and shows him explaining why many *nisei* kept this information from her generation. At this point, a section of Aunt Yuka's interview, a section which signifies her own level of peace with her father's suicide, is included: "Dad had such a meaningful life. I don't know that I'd be terribly concerned about how Dad died or when he died. I think the significant thing is that he lived!"

Then Yasui features several minutes of interview material about Masuo's altruistic work teaching citizenship classes for members of the Japanese-North American community in his new-found home of Portland, Oregon. She subsequently circles back to her own response (tears) and her flood of recognition of Robert's pain, upon learning the circumstances of Masuo's premature death. This back-and-forth structure parallels many peoples' experience of dealing with trauma: people seldom progress through stages of grief from one to ten, in a linear, methodical fashion. Instead, ambivalence and emotional flux are commonplace. Yasui's film craft exquisitely mirrors the mutable nature of human emotion and memory.

In fact, Yasui continues to deal with the consequences of her representational choices in making the film. In a telephone conversation (5/10/91), I asked Yasui what her family's reaction to her film was after they had seen the finished version. This question seems important, given what she wrote about the impossibility of any film being completely representative. What follows is my summary of her response. She said that it is hard to say that there was one reaction from her family, since her family is quite large. Their reactions varied from enthusiastic approval to quiet apprehension. While other *sansei* seemed to identify with her experience of trying to coax family history out of relatives, many *nisei* were very concerned with what had been left out. For instance, some felt her Uncle Min, the lawyer so active in the reparations movement, should have been given more screen time because of his great contributions to the community.

While most family members felt comfortable on some level with her piece when it was in limited distribution, their anxiety increased when the Public Broadcasting Service picked up FAMILY GATHERING for broadcasting. Forty years after his death, some family members continued to be concerned about other peoples' interpretation of Masuo Yasui's suicide. The Yasui family honor continues to be very important to them, and they worried that mainstream audiences would misinterpret Masuo's suicide as an admission of guilt. Yasui herself feels that his suicide was probably directly linked to emotional depression caused by the scars of unjust imprisonment.

## SOUNDTRACK

A careful examination of the soundtrack of FAMILY GATHERING reveals an intricate mixture of musical themes, ambient sounds, and excellent interview sound. I interpret the music mixture on the soundtrack as an expression of Yasui's multifaceted experience living in the United States as a woman of half Japanese, half white ancestry. In addition, the experience of Robert's generation of relatives can be associated with this mixture of types of music, since they too live under the influence of two different cultural systems. Yasui alternately includes *shakuhachi* (Japanese flute) music, *koto* (traditional stringed Japanese instrument) music, and simple Western-style piano chords to illustrate her film musically. The music, composed by Sumi Tonooka, is woven in sparingly, used as an accent and an aid to

transitions within the film, rather than used as a constant presence. Tonooka is a Japanese/African American woman whose mother was interned during the war.

The ambient sound of the film is really where the most interesting intricacy lies. The faint ambient sounds accompanying old home movies evoke the memory of sounds, which adds richness to the sense of the tenuousness of visual and emotional memories. For instance, Yasui often includes the white leader sections of the 8-millimeter films. When the leader is shown, the sound of a film projector is subtly evident: the rapid click-click-click of the flywheel engaging the sprocket-holes of film. Since Yasui at the same time narrates about the fact that her former vision of her family's past is largely shaped by these home movies, hearing the sounds of a projector brings the viewer closer to her experience of watching these movies over and over again, learning to associate the sounds with family. In other scenes from the home movies, like those which portray the West Coast Yasui children, sounds of children laughing are layered in; likewise, in the street scenes, car engine noises are faintly present. In the numerous outdoor scenes, ambient bird noises fade in and out. All these sounds add verisimilitude to Yasui's construction of her past.

## COMPLETION

Because Yasui does not claim universality in the presentation of her own and her family's experiences, I think her documentary is ultimately more valid than those produced using conventional documentary codes. Yasui speaks her own truth, never presuming to speak for anyone else. In this way, the film becomes a genuine, undisputable depiction of a reality which deserves careful consideration.

Yasui concludes her film with some words about her former sense of her ancestral past, her revised understanding of the internment of Japanese-North Americans, her family's history, and the interconnection between them all:

"Now I watch these movies and everything looks a little different. I'm aware of the history that lies behind these images; and the moments of togetherness recorded here I no longer take for granted. It's a past my family made for themselves. And it's a past they gave to me."

Here Yasui weaves back into the fabric of that memory new information and stories which flesh out and bring to life a sketchy (and false) recollection. She forgives her family's reconstruction of the past, forgives their silences and omissions, because she now understands the incredible pain associated with the war years. Not only do those years bring back memories of their own complete upheaval, incarceration, and destruction of their family unit. Those years also signal the beginning of the spiritual and physical death of the "self-made man" they knew and loved in their father. Yasui decides that they deserve to create the past they want to have, after surviving the traumas associated with the camps.

She in turn gives herself permission to do the same. At the end of the documentary she does not discard her favorite memory of listening to her grandfather talk into the night. As a child she felt that she had a special connection with Masuo: in the memory he repeatedly looked at her and smiled. Now that she knows more than ever about him, now that he feels more real to her than ever before, the memory is richer and more meaningful. This is Yasui's reward for engaging in this filmic

search for personal history.

## NOTES

1. Distributor of one-hour version is PBS Video. Distributor of 30-minute version is New Day Films, 121 W. 27th St., Suite 902, New York, NY 1001, (212) 645-8210.
2. Several films and videos about Japanese-North American internment use clips from *Japanese Relation* (1943, 11 minutes), a United States government Office of War Information newsreel. Narrated by Milton S. Eisenhower, the newsreel depicts scenes of crowds of Japanese Americans as they wait for government officials to process their paperwork, take fingerprints, and load them on buses and trains to the waiting concentration camps. The videotape now in distribution (through the National Audiovisual Center in Washington, D.C.) offers the disclaimer that the newsreel does not necessarily reflect current governmental policy.

## WORKS CITED

Aptheker, B. (1989). *Tapestries of Life: Women's Work, Women's Consciousness, and the Meaning of Daily Experience*. Amherst University of Massachusetts Press.

Friedman, T., & Shapiro, O. (1989). "Their Holocaust, upon Watching Ours." *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 34, 64-72.

Gesensway, D., & Rosentan, M. (1987). *Beyond Words: Images from America's Concentration Camps*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Julien, I., & Mercer, K. (1988). "Introduction: De-margin and de-centre." *Screen*, 29 (4), 210.

Kikumura, A. (1981). *Through Harsh Winters: The Life of a Japanese Immigrant Woman*. Novato, CA: Chandler & Sharp.

Matsumoto, V. (1989). "Japanese American Women during World War II." In B. Aptheker, *Tapestries of Life: Women's Work, Women's Consciousness, and the Meaning of Daily Experience* (pp. 191-195). Amherst University of Massachusetts Press. [Reprinted from *Frontiers*, 1984, 8 (1), 81.]

Personal Narratives Group. (Ed.) (1989). *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Tsukamoto, M. (1986). Interview. In F. Buss, *Dignity: Lower Income Women Tell of Their Lives and Struggles* (p. 107). Ann Arbor University of Michigan Press.

Yamada, M. (1981b). "Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster." In C. Moraga & G. Anzaldua (Eds.), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (pp. 35-40). New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press.

Yamada, M. (1981a). "Asian Pacific American Women and Feminism." In C. Moraga & G. Anzaldua (Eds.) , *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (pp. 71-75). New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press.

Yamano, H. (1989). My Mother's Stories. In B. Aptheker, *Tapestries of Life*:

*Women's Work, Women's Consciousness, and the Meaning of Daily Experience*  
(pp. 31-32). Amherst University of Massachusetts Press.

Yasui, L. (Director). (1988). FAMILY GATHERING (60-minute version).

Yasui, L. (1990). *FAMILY GATHERING: A Study Guide*. Philadelphia: Author.

Thanks to the Center for the Study of Women and Society at the University of Oregon for support.

---

[To top](#)    [Current issue](#)    [Archived essays](#)    [Jump Cut home](#)

*AIDS: Chapter One. Tongues Untied.*

*Absolutely Positive*

**PBS and AIDS**

by Ronald Gregg

from *Jump Cut*, no. 37, July 1992, pp. 64-71

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1992, 2006

Last year PBS announced the new season of its P.O.V. series, which included Peter Adair's ABSOLUTELY POSITIVE and Marion Riggs' TONGUES UNTIED, two documentaries by gay men who had tested HIV+. I spent that summer in a Midwestern city where ABSOLUTELY POSITIVE was shown, but TONGUES UNTIED was canceled. I phoned the local PBS station for an explanation, and a station representative told me that the station management had previewed the program and decided to replace it because they were upset by the obscenity, i.e. "The film used the 'F' word about every minute." The representative continued, "I am not a prude, but even I found the show obscene," and she ended the conversation by noting that the station aired ABSOLUTELY POSITIVE, so they couldn't be accused of prejudice against homosexuals.

Shortly after the night that TONGUES UNTIED should have aired in that town, I received a bootleg videotaped copy recorded by an anonymous person at the station. I watched the video with friends and quickly realized that it wasn't "fuck" that had disturbed the representative, but the tape's political ideas and aggressive, graphic, gay sexual imagery. Clearly, the management feared that the form and content would disturb their "market," the white upper-middle class patrons who financially "support" the station.

Last summer approximately two thirds of the country's PBS stations cancelled TONGUES UNTIED (Milloy 3). This no doubt had a chilling effect and spells trouble for the P.O.V. producers' goal to air all "points-of-view." As with previous PBS programming controversies, the problem lies with subject matter and style: subordinate minorities may speak, but only with a weak, passive voice, safely subordinated to that of the sympathetic, white upper-middle class. To illustrate how this works, I only need to compare Adair's and Riggs' separate summer offerings.

Adair's ABSOLUTELY POSITIVE is a tape that I admire but I also recognize that in ways, it plays into the mainstream representation of gays and HIV+ groups. In particular, it keeps them distant, controlled, and sympathetic through the interview/talking heads format. A viewer can easily judge these nice HIV+ persons,

seeing them as receiving their sad retribution for a past "unhealthy" lifestyle. On the other hand, Riggs uses a variety of stylistic means to explore his own black gay background and lifestyle with no justification, no apology. The work is confrontational and aesthetically provocative, never neutral, as it exposes the prejudice and condescension of the white majority, including white gay men. (See Chuck Kleinhans' in-depth analysis of TONGUES UNTIED and his interview with Riggs in *Jump Cut* 36.) Adair allows comfortable distance; Riggs gets under the skin. Adair can be safely televised; Riggs cannot.

That PBS censored TONGUES UNTIED is not surprising. That act is consistent with PBS' history of its relationship to independent documentarists in the United States. PBS' original freedom and independence, its mandate to offer a diverse set of political and social viewpoints, has been attacked and undermined almost from the beginning of its creation in 1967. First during the Nixon administration, then intensifying during the Reagan years, political and commercial pressure groups have systematically attempted to erode or destroy PBS' original mission.

I offer here a brief historical review of the politicization of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), which provides some funding for PBS, and a description of the steady encroachment of solicited commercial and public funding for PBS during the Reagan presidency. I then wish to discuss PBS' blatant censorship of documentary programming, focusing on the 1982 MIDDLETOWN series and the SEVENTEEN episode. Following that, I shall analyze the style and content of the documentary AIDS: CHAPTER ONE (Thea Chalow, 1985), appearing on PBS' NOVA series. This series significantly illustrates a more insidious result of political and funding pressures on PBS documentaries.

AIDS: CHAPTER ONE misleads while it appears to inform. The series as a whole reflects PBS' desire for a safe, reassuring documentation of reality in the Reagan 80's, one which would promote the view of the dominant cultural and medical establishment as unified, powerful, all knowing and well meaning. Looked at closely, the program's simplifications amount to distortions; its clichéd, conventional, narrative form misrepresents both the medical community's role and attitude vis-à-vis the AIDS crisis and the humanity of gay PWAs (People with AIDS).

#### PBS' HISTORY: POLITICAL CONTROL OVER PBS

PBS' independence and freedom from governmental controls (supposedly guaranteed by federal policy written in 1967) was very short lived. Congress left too many loopholes. Within two years, the Nixon administration, unhappy with PBS programming, set out to control this new broadcast system. Political programs which allowed Nixon's adversaries a platform and programs reflecting the social turmoil of the Vietnam War regularly raised the ire of the Nixon administration. To suppress such political discourse on PBS, Nixon and his staff attacked the CPB, which provided financial support for PBS. Papers released under the Freedom of Information Act in 1979 reveal that Nixon had ordered "all funds for public broadcasting be cut immediately" (qtd. in Wicklein 28). But upon the advice of his Office of Telecommunications Policy, Nixon instead appointed men sympathetic to his viewpoint to the CPB board. An internal White House memo confirms this premeditated action: "We need eight loyalists to control the present CPB board and fire the current staff who make the grants" (qtd. in Wicklein 28).

The offending programs soon disappeared from the television screen. The CPB began collaborating with the Nixon White House, meeting with the administration and providing lists detailing future programming and program guests. Predictably, Nixon continued to use his veto power, forcing Congress to pass budgets with less funding devoted to public affairs programming (Harrison 34, 37).

The Ford and Carter administrations allowed PBS to regain some of its former journalistic freedom and independence. Later, as S. L. Harrison, a former director of corporate communications for CPB, points out, in terms of public broadcasting policy, the Reagan administration brought back "the same spirit and some of the same personalities of the Nixon administration [Pat Buchanan, for one]..." (37). Amid the budget reallocations of the early 80s, the first budget plan submitted to Congress by Reagan's Office of Management and Budget offered public broadcasting no government funding. The Reagan administration proposed that public broadcasting should survive through advertising, foundation and corporate sponsorship, and viewers' contributions (Harrison 37).

As a compromise with the Reagan administration, Congress reduced funding for the 1983 CPB budget from the previous allocation of \$172 million to \$137 million. CPB's budget remained at this operating level until the 1987 budget allocations which increased CPB's appropriation to \$200 million (United States 257). Beginning in 1982, as the future loss in government funding became obvious, PBS courted corporate and public support to make up the difference. Additionally, programs difficult to finance, such as news and public affairs programs, were cut.

#### SEVENTEEN AND THE "NEW" CONTROLS ON PBS PROGRAMMING

The SEVENTEEN case study illustrates the pressures that these new sources of funding began to exert on PBS programming. In 1982, PBS aired a six-part series called MIDDLETOWN. Five of the six episodes offered a mostly positive portrayal of various aspects of contemporary Muncie, Indiana. However, one of the installments, SEVENTEEN, a film that explored black and white working-class high school students, showed Muncie high schoolers smoking pot, resisting school authorities, drinking at parties, and most significantly, scenes of interracial kissing. The producer, Peter Davis, eventually pulled this installment from the series after pressure from Xerox, the corporate sponsor for the MIDDLETOWN series, various citizens of Muncie and PBS executives.

After a preview of SEVENTEEN, company officials at Xerox, concerned about the image that the film projected, found the program too offensive for the Xerox image. Although Xerox did not rescind its funding for the series, it dropped its promised national advertising campaign for MIDDLETOWN and publicly disassociated itself from the series (Lingemann 723). Following Xerox's reaction, again after previewing SEVENTEEN, the community of Muncie pressured PBS to cancel that installment, claiming that the documentary skewed the presentation of their high school. A group of parents and school officials threatened a lawsuit claiming that the documentary filmmakers had not received proper consent for the participation by minors in the filming. Citing matters of "taste," PBS, in turn, pressured Davis to edit five minutes out of the footage, a scene where two teenage boys discuss sex. After meeting with a citizen's group from Muncie, PBS officials requested additional cuts, whereupon in response Davis pulled the documentary from the

series (Mayer 35).

Analyzing the controversy and SEVENTEEN's content, Patricia Zimmerman notes how the documentary's form and style contributed to rejection of the film. Instead of the film's concentrating on one student's reactions and experiences to high school "through a structure of development, crisis, and resolution," as Zimmermann points out, the documentary offers "over 37 different characters," and

"with such a multitude of characters, many of whom come and go in the course of the film, SEVENTEEN not only portrays working-class teenagers but structurally abandons the myth of bourgeois individualism isolated from social interaction that pervaded the rest of the series' films." (14)

Zimmermann adds that the documentary's style of hand-held camera, long takes, and wide-angle lens doesn't allow the viewer an objective, passive distance from the material (14-15). As a result, viewers' hostile reactions to SEVENTEEN's subject matter were heightened by its unconventional style, which challenged what the viewer expected from a documentary. The people of Muncie wanted to sound and look on film like an all-American, Norman Rockwellian community, but SEVENTEEN's structure and style challenged such an image and all its implications.

The SEVENTEEN controversy underscores not only the new economic controls on PBS' content, but, equally important, the developing formal restrictions on style in political and social documentaries for PBS. Independent film producer Lawrence Daressa summarizes the effect that corporate and public sources of financing had on PBS:

"More and more, public television was distinguished from its commercial competitors only in that it lacked the courage of its own lack of conviction. In short, public television was sacrificing its original broad public purpose of programming diversity and innovation in pursuit of its narrow commercial ambitions." (qtd. in Aufderheide 4)

PBS' reliance on corporate sponsors resulted in a particular emphasis on non-controversial programming in culture, science and nature, and education. Other subject matter and other formats were either censored or rebuffed by corporations that exerted control over the programs. For instance, Bill Moyers was unable to air controversial opinions for A WALK THROUGH THE 20TH CENTURY funded by Chevron; indeed, after three "controversial" programs on his BILL MOYERS JOURNAL, corporate sponsorship was canceled.

S. L. Harrison claims that during the time he worked for CPB, from 1976 to 1985, public TV producers regularly showed programs to underwriters to make sure that the shows would not offend sponsors, an exercise in blatant and willing self-censorship. Corporate sponsors declare candidly that they should not throw money away on programs that fail to promote a "feel-good" image for the company (Harrison 38).

We should finally note that besides creating funding problems for public

broadcasting, the Reagan administration appointed new members to CPB's board, which oversees CPB's distribution of limited resources. In 1984, Sonia Landau, who had headed Women for Reagan/Bush in the 1984 election, replaced the CPB board chairperson. Like many such appointments of conservatives hostile to contemporary art and artists to arts and humanities boards, this act underscored the politicization and nepotism of the board. This new Reagan-controlled CPR board asked why PBS focused on controversial issues and not on patriotic programming. Such programming would emphasize national achievement or the classics. Weighing in with unintentional irony, Landau thought there should be a series developed explaining the U.S. Constitution. In sum, the board, like other funding sources, worked systematically and effectively to control the ideological content of PBS' programming.

#### HOW A "POPULAR" PBS SERIES REPRESENTED THE AIDS CRISIS

NOVA, one of PBS' prestige series, continues to receive generous corporate sponsorship. It is promoted as a program that contains "explorations of exciting developments on the cutting edge of science, medicine, and technology." The series entered its 19th season in 1991, ranked third in popularity for all of PBS' continuous series (Renewal Record from PBS). It appears that NOVA has never faced the financial difficulties that more challenging or controversial programs have faced.

Given its image, longevity and continued corporate support, Nova's tackling of AIDS might have been considered daring, even surprising for the year 1985. However, to view Thea Chalow's AIDS: CHAPTER ONE shown on NOVA is to realize how far PBS had strayed from its mission to foster innovation and diversity in programming and how successfully the Reagan controls had become entrenched by that time.

A documentary can be a political statement or representation as much by what it omits or by its conventional, omniscient, objective pretensions as by any explicit political message contained in the footage. Superficially, AIDS: CHAPTER ONE purports to show how medical science responded to the AIDS crisis, covering the period from 1981, beginning with the discovery of the AIDS epidemic in the U.S. by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), to 1984, ending with the announcement of Robert Gab's discovery of HTLV-III (the U.S. version of the human retrovirus) by Margaret Heckler, Reagan's Health and Human Services Secretary. Even the title suggests a comprehensive, authoritative first installment, an "All About AIDS" to date.

The documentary actually promotes a false picture of cooperation, harmony and progress as selected doctors and researchers recount team-sleuthing efforts to track down the killer disease and save its helpless victims. The medical/ scientific community's voice in AIDS: CHAPTER ONE is one of power, facts, control, and yes, compassion verging on pity. The pariah victims, passive and feminized, have virtually no voice at all. Sick and alone, they wait for death or a miracle from their medical saviors.

The director relies upon a conventional narrative structure and style to show how the medical community discovered the virus that leads to AIDS. Unlike the challenging, unconventional style of SEVENTEEN or TONGUES UNTIED, this

format limits any discussion of the real problems involved with early AIDS research and funding. In fact, the program depicts a powerful establishment institution favorably in the very way that supports the "national achievement" ideal for PBS programming, which was expressed by the Reagan-appointed CPB Wad.

Promoting the documentary's 1985 premiere, *TV Guide* notes that Dr. Robert Gallo works at the "forefront of U.S. AIDS research." The Guide's synopsis explains, "He [Gallo] and other scientists in the U.S. and France retrace the steps that led them to their first big breakthrough: the isolation of an AIDS-causing virus" (*TV Guide* A95). The documentary was clearly not conceived to challenge or question in any way how the CDC, Gallo, or other medical researchers handled the search for the virus. The program could never entertain the concept that doctors may be ignorant, harbor prejudice and often work in a self-servingly competitive way.

#### DOCUMENTARY MADE LIKE FICTION

Written, produced, and directed by Thea Chalow, AIDS: CHAPTER ONE lapses into a classical, fictional narrative structure through its use of individuals with consistent psychological characteristics, a goal-oriented narrative, causality determined by characters, and narrative linearity. (See David Bordwell's discussion of the classical Hollywood narrative, pgs. 157-164). Chalow's documentary is set up like a Hollywood detective story with three principal, stereotypical characters: the detective, the victim, and the killer.

The doctors and medical researchers from Chalow's documentary embody the detective role. These medical doctors/researchers are consistently shown as the ever-active characters. They talk on the telephone, observe patients, and work in the laboratories, looking for clues. Their active, knowledgeable roles are further emphasized by their being called by their professional titles, juxtaposed against the first name labeling of the patients.

In the beginning, as the mystery unfolds, the narrator explains that the doctors/detectives remain "bewildered" about the nature of this new medical killer. Although sympathetic and benevolent around the patient/victims, these medical detectives are described as "protected emotionally," able to continue even though surrounded by death. They piece the evidence together logically, stalking the AIDS killer. Strong and heroic, they never use plastic gloves to protect themselves when dealing with their patients. They are shown as they actively move from location to location, solely focused on their mission.

Meticulous in their records, these detectives piece together the traits of the virus that leads to AIDS, taking the "fingerprints" of the killer and discovering its identity. The main characters set the medical narrative goal in the film: a race against time to "track down" the cause of AIDS and save the disease's victims.

The targets of the documentary's elusive killer are the gay AIDS patients. The entire program feminizes people with AIDS, following the easy, predictable stereotyping of homosexuals in the dominant media. The "fear[ful]" gay "victims," as labeled by the documentary, helplessly and passively await the disease, much as the hapless women in standard detective films fear their pursuer and await deliverance or protection.

Kevin McConville, a featured AIDS patient, claims, "I have never hurt a fly." And in an earlier close up, the camera lingering to record his pain, Kevin, unlike the stoic doctors, holds back tears as he discusses his friend Bill's death from AIDS.

"Victims" in AIDS: CHAPTER ONE are shown doing domestic tasks in the home, watering the plants or putting up the groceries after a trip to the supermarket, recalling the stereotypical housewifely lack of empowerment or authority.

At another representational level, these gay "victims" remain stigmatized by a sexually transmitted disease which gays have spread "outside the homosexual community," according to the narrator. In this aspect, they are depicted similar to Hollywood's femmes fatales who, even if the film offers an apology for their harmful behavior, must be punished for their loose, sexual conduct. In fact, at the end of the documentary, we are informed that Kevin died, with the reminder that he had contracted "AIDS through sexual contact with a person infected with the virus..." Deserted by family and friends for their sinful actions, these guilty "victims" are comforted by heroes in white who continue working out in the dangerous world-sleuthing to save gay victims' lives.

The third character in this detective narrative deals with the elusive killer, AIDS. In AIDS: CHAPTER ONE, this cruel, heartless predator causes its "victims" to "die a miserable death," while spreading "hysteria" among the general population. Dr. Jaffe, of the Center for Disease Control, characterizes the days before they had identified the retrovirus as "scary times," reinforcing the implication that the cause for alarm has abated or been tamed. Thus, AIDS, although not given a human face, becomes personified in the program as "an insidious new killer," causing death and panic among the population.

With these characters, Chalow follows a classical detective story model. First, the film has a standard, expository introduction, omnipotently relaying background information through a male narrator (similar to the narrative voice in crime dramas, such as DRAGNET's, "This is the city..."). The opening shot establishes San Francisco as the dark city where the killer surfaces. As the narrator relates the pre-AIDS political and social turmoil of a sexually liberated gay community, the montage sequence moves the viewer from the opening shot of the Golden Gate Bridge to an active Castro Street scene. The camera specifically focuses on a stereotypical image of two gay men with arms wrapped around each other while one rests his hand on his partner's ass. At this point, the narrator intones that in the Castro, "gay men celebrated their sexual liberation in private clubs and bathhouses," establishing the environment of the exotic, sexual "other."

The narration moves to discuss AIDS, and the editing cuts to our first "victim," Bobby Reynolds, seen walking alone down the street. After giving background on Bobby, as he visits his health clinic or sits alone in his darkened kitchen, the narrator tells us that "this is the story of how modern science has begun to unravel its [AIDS] mystery." This opening prologue closes with a "Biological Hazard" warning sign and a nurse wearing mask, gown, and gloves entering the danger area, emphasizing the horror and contagion associated with the killer.

The documentary then shows how "medical detectives tracked down the who, what, and where of this deadly new epidemic. The hunt for why followed? This detective format dominates and shapes the script. After the introduction, the film shifts to the Center for Disease Control, introducing its "elite" corps of

epidemiologists who put the first pieces of the puzzle together. After the first AIDS cases are reported, one of the "elite," Dr. James Curran, asks rhetorically, "What could be going on in gay men?" Here, the medical detectives begin to formulate questions about the gay victims' habits that will lead to possible clues. With each answered question, the narrator claims that the detectives have one more piece of the puzzle, one more clue. In the meantime, the doctors and patients remain "alert" for signs of AIDS, which can "attack" at any moment.

Eventually, as the narrator notes, "evidence began to accumulate" until "the secret code was broken." The film concludes with the narrator explaining that "the first heat has been run" against this "disease of the century? Although the doctors have won this "first heat," as with fictional villains such as Dr. Moriarty, AIDS is still at large, the race is "far from over." More AIDS chapters, we may infer, will follow to keep us abreast of the drama. From beginning to end, the documentary is trapped in this mystery/detective format and all information offered to us is selected and, as a result, shaped to conform to the narrative structure.

Aside from the narrative, AIDS: CHAPTER ONE is trapped by its illusion of historical, chronological linearity. Each scene is connected by the narrator who moves us forward by specific time periods or by the discovery of a new clue and the explanation of the importance of that clue and how it was uncovered. Each scene follows the previous one in a closed logical paradigm. The editing sets and tightens the narrative noose, which guarantees that the documentary is representing reality and truth.

In his study of film narration, David Bordwell points out that the dominant style found in the classical fictional film is characterized by centering, control of sound and lighting, and linear editing (162-163). Chalow's documentary has little camera movement, only an occasional pan to follow someone down a corridor or through a door. The scenes remain static: the figure is planted in center space in such actions as talking on a telephone or giving a blood sample.

The documentary also uses many "talking heads" centered in the frame where a figure sits behind or on a desk, looking directly into the camera with unchallenged authority. The sound track emphasizes only the narrator and talking heads, removing background noises and disturbances to keep the attention on the dominant voice. In the same vein, the spaces are well lit to remove shadows, thus eliminating visual nuances or distractions. The editing moves with a predetermined, linear sense. It remains non-obtrusive, designed like the sound and the lighting to focus our attention on the individuals and their legitimacy and control. Chalow's film clearly uses a classical Hollywood style as well as form.

Beyond the preconceived authority implied by a historical documentary on medical science, a documentary film of this type tries to convince us of its realism through stylistic authority and evidence. First, there is the presence of the authoritative narrator giving an account of our heroes' search. The narrator, a central force of disembodied objectivity, helps to create a cohesion to the film, connecting scenes through a guiding temporal discourse, and, in the manner of an infallible teacher, explaining the science behind AIDS. This stereotypical, professional male voice carries a presumed weight of truth, reinforced from its use in countless newsreels, documentaries and television reportage.

Second, images of science back up the medical authorities, graphically supporting their scientific validity and objectivity. In the laboratory, we are treated to test tubes, computers, and microscopes. Clinical pictures of AIDS patients with Kaposi Sarcoma (KS), microscopic views of blood cells, and X-rays demonstrate a medical realism that seems to record the scientific truth.

Third, the film uses animation to illustrate how AIDS works in the body. We see how the body's defenses break down with the onset of AIDS. With these diagrams, the narrative presents a condescending, simplified scientific explanation that evidences the superiority of science over our knowledge.

Fourth, the institutions that support these medical detectives provide imposing, material authority. The film makes a point to establish the identity of each prestigious institute before discussing the accomplishments carried out inside.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, the "talking heads" or medical authorities speak from behind their desks with piles of books in the background. The composition uses centered figures who look directly in the camera to emphasize the truth and candor of their words. Dr. Montaigne displays his notebook during one of these sequences, illustrating the authoritative results of his experiments.

By these various stylistic methods of representation and empowerment by its narrative fictional form, AIDS: CHAPTER ONE aspires to create the illusion of a historically objective presentation of reality. Chuck Kleinhans, however, notes that these "tired clichés" of the dominant PBS form "cover over social cracks and contradictions" (321). The medical participants tell their story from their own viewpoints while the PWAs become mere pawns and guinea pigs for those authoritative voices. Chalow, appearing to remain aloof and objective and using a limited and limiting conventional style and format, fails to expose the very real problems in her portrayal of doctors and PWAs.

Looking back at the historical context during the time that AIDS: CHAPTER ONE was made, the documentary's problems and limitations are clearly inevitable. As Kleinhans explains, a simple "problem and solution" documentary of this type, "removes the problem from its larger political, economic, and social framework and presents it on its most empirically observable level" (325). So what historical realities, what "framework" does Chalow miss, losing the opportunity to educate herself and us?

In her representation of PWAS, all of Chalow's examples are white, gay men. This reinforces the belief that AIDS is a gay disease with gay men passing the "killer AIDS" through the rest of the population like a "plague." This is further emphasized by the animation illustrating the AIDS risk groups. Her diagram starts with gays; then in a vanishing point perspective, the animation adds drug abusers, Haitians, and finally hemophiliacs, after which the two lines enclosing these groups meet in the far distance. Hemophiliacs, the innocent victims, are therefore the last group in the "general public" to get AIDS indirectly from guilty, contaminated gay men.

However, the statistical breakdown of PWAs during the period covered by Chalow's documentary tells another story. Gerald M. Oppenheimer points out that the first heterosexual patients (one of whom was female) were reported in August of 1981,

only a few months after the MMWR's first report on Pneumocystis Pneumonia (PCP) among five gay men. In June 1982, the MMWR noted that almost one third of the heterosexual patients with KS and/or PCP were women (Oppenheimer 279). In 1983, Larry Kramer noted, "Six percent of all AIDS cases are now occurring in what ...is called 'the general population,' i.e., people who are not gay, Haitian, hemophiliacs, or IV drug users" (69).

Chalow doesn't mention these patients. In his discussion on how a population responds to an epidemic, Guenter B. Risse explains,

"Flight and denial come first, followed by the scapegoating of those who are judged to be different by virtue of religious beliefs, cultural practices, or economic status. These social reactions reveal our ambiguities about the meaning of such diseases while furnishing convenient targets for projecting responsibilities and blame."

This is what happened with AIDS. By failing to provide the real, statistical patient breakdown, Chalow fails to adequately discuss how patients were stigmatized during the period covered by her film.

In her narrative, the gay patients are alienated, isolated from lovers and family, and helplessly dependent upon the medical system and support groups. In this way, the film emphasizes gays living in quasi-quarantined situations. Bobby and Kevin finally have as their only companions their faithful dogs. In her discussion of the "iconography of disease," Sander Gilman notes that the isolated gay patient embodies

"both victim and cause of his own pollution. Already feminized in the traditional view of his sexuality, the gay man can now also represent the conflation of the images of the male sufferer and female source of suffering traditionally associated with syphilis." (99)

As noted, Chalow's restrictive narrative form imposes this feminized role upon the gay "sufferer," once more reinforcing a stereotype and a myth, not challenging them.

This isolation of the gay patient, except for the caretaking presence of the doctors and medical personnel, suggests a helplessness on the patient's part. It dehumanizes the PWA as a passive, non-participant in life, existing on the edge of death. These individuals, the documentary implies, no longer have an active life or an authentic voice. Chalow gives AIDS support groups a passing mention when introducing Kevin McConville, but the film's form emphasizes the isolation.

In reality, however, at the time of the documentary, the gay community had already started to show PWAs that AIDS did not need to lead to a passive acceptance of death. The medical and scientific communities by no means offered the sole sources for health support and hope. Larry Kramer wrote in 1983, "GMHC [Gay Men's Health Crisis] provides crisis counseling, group therapy, welfare guidance, recreational activities, and hospital and home care" (71). Kramer's article in the *Village Voice* points to active, effective and realistic participation by groups other than the medical community. In fact, after viewing AIDS: CHAPTER ONE, one can only ask in frustration or anger: Where are the patients whose friends did stay and

help take care of them? Where are the PWAs who became a political force in addition to supporting "friends," calling for increased government funding for research and especially services? From Chalow's film, no one would envision or suspect the emerging, challenging, untidy existence of AIDS activists such as ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) that included PWAs. This coalition didn't suddenly spring up one magical spring afternoon to protest on Wall Street.

Only once does Chalow mention gay activists, noting that in the summer of 1983, "gay activists criticized the government's response to the health crises and urged additional funding for research." From Chalow's film, one would think that PWAs always trusted doctors, that they should trust doctors more than informed activist friends. The concept is certainly not new, that of treating patients in humane, practical and useful ways, beyond just treating the disease. Yet such a concept remains chillingly absent from this documentary. To have explored such concepts would, of course, have destroyed the work's symmetry and challenged the certainties shown.

On a related subject, Chalow's film does not discuss the political problems with funding that gay activists were protesting. In his first term of office, backed up by his "trickle down" approach to economics and the communist threat, Reagan was able to reduce taxes, increase the military budget, and cut domestic spending on social problems such as health. If AIDS, in fact, represents a "plague," why does Chalow not explore the slow response to funding for research and health related services for HIV infected persons?

AIDS: CHAPTER ONE fails to discuss the implications of the money that did get spent on research. The film's tag ending gives the following reassurance: "A blood screening test is currently available and will help to prevent the spread of AIDS through blood transfusion." But never does she make the connection between the discovery of HTLV-III (attributed to Gallo) and the commercial production of kits that would test the blood supply, thus keeping the panicked general public free from the "gay plague."

A host of related material questions arise: What companies benefited from the marketing of these kits? Did the availability of testing affect the handling of AIDS by insurance companies? Why does the documentary make no mention and certainly no critique of the strident calls for testing to identify "AIDS carriers" and quarantine them? Why, one finally wonders, does Chalow provide no discussion at all of how the government directed its meager funding for AIDS during this period?

In the film's controlled format and content, Chalow lets the medical and research community escape unscathed, unblemished by internecine quarreling or controversy. In this version of reality, the medical community is presented as an empirical, understanding caretaker. Medical personnel put their patients at ease, at one point, through humor, recalling the all-to-frequent infantilization of patients by jocular authority figures.

But where, one wonders, are the medical panics and the doctors and nurses who refused to treat AIDS patients? Instances of such Hippocratic betrayals even made the newspaper and network news. Randy Shilts writes that in 1982, reports noted how some nurses in New York "were simply refusing to work with AIDS patients, leaving food trays at their door and allowing them to lie for entire shifts in sheets

stained with defecation" (197). And the film offers, of course, no real balanced discussion of the medical community's debate over quarantining. Only Dr. Paul Volberding is quoted on the subject of hospital quarantining procedures, and he pronounces his hospital's isolation of AIDS patients a complete success.

Chalow's film fails to explore the source of the media panic: the medical journals from which the popular press gets its medical understanding and perception of disease. Not surprisingly, this document makes no mention of the battle of egos and ambition that played in the race against AIDS, trivializing the medical objective and creating a media spectacle of a race between France and the United States. Robert Gallo's highly publicized but controversial discovery of HTLV-III, for years contested as the same virus discovered one year earlier by the French, finds no place in this documentary.

It is typical of AIDS: CHAPTER ONE's closed circuit approach that it provides no opposing scientific viewpoints to challenge the models that its scientists developed to explain how the virus works. Oppenheimer points out that "the epidemiologists' approach may have skewed the choice of models and the hypotheses pursued and may have offered some justification for homophobia" (291). This justification, however, should not exculpate a documentarian of the AIDS crisis. Chalow's narrative structure simply accepts the researchers' explanations and models. She offers this to the viewer as the truth.

AIDS: CHAPTER ONE presents a sanitized reality, avoiding controversy through its appearance of objectivity and distance from the issues. Thea Chalow has chosen to ground her film in reassuring classical narrative style and form, featuring problem and resolution. Her approach — unwittingly, one hopes — diminishes the humanity of persons infected with MW. It is surely a cruel irony that this film about AIDS really stands as a story about power and success.

It would obviously be unrealistic to expect a single documentary to explore all the questions raised here. Questions and dilemmas, however, could at least have been raised in spite of the film's restricting form and style. Whatever the pressures and motivations surrounding the making of AIDS: CHAPTER ONE, it fails to represent the medical or human realities of the infection.

Both the censorship of Marlon Riggs' recent TONGUES UNTIED and the airing of AIDS: CHAPTER ONE on NOVA illustrate the failure of PBS' mission and potential. When political, corporate, and other moneyed controls combine to promote a cautious, non-controversial representation of reality, truth in all its complexity is an inevitable victim. Riggs' powerful documentary, TONGUES UNTIED, an ironic title in light of this study, reminds us of what PBS was supposed to be all about.

#### SOURCES CITED

Aufderheide, Pat. "Toward Anti-Television: The Independent Production Service and the Future of Public Broadcasting." *Afterimage* March 1989:4-5.

Bordwell, David. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Madison, Wis.: Univ. of Wis. Press, 1985.

Gilman, Sander. "AIDS and Syphilis: The Iconography of Disease." *October* 43 (1987): 87-107.

Harrison, S. L "Prime Time Pablum: How Politics and Corporate Influence Keep Public TV Harmless." *Washington Monthly* Jan. 1986: 33-34, 37-39.

Kleinhans, Chuck. "Forms, Politics, Makers, and Contexts: Basic Issues for a Theory of Radical Political Documentary." *"Show Us Life" — Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*. Ed. Thomas Waugh. Metuchen, NJ.: Scarecrow Press, 1984.318-342.

Kramer, Larry. *Reports from the Holocaust: the Making of an AIDS Activist*. New York, St. Martin's Press, 1989.

Lingemann, Richard. "Muncie Protests its Own." *Nation* 12 June 1982:722-27.

Mayer, Jane. "Producer Pulls Show Off Public Television Rather than Cut It." *Wall Street Journal* 31 March 1982: 35.

Milloy, Courtland. "Film on Black Gays Is Bold, But Ignores the Big Picture." *Washington Post* 18 July 1991: C3.

Oppenheimer, Gerald M. "In the Eye of the Storm: the Epidemiological Construction of AIDS." *AIDS: The Burdens of History*. Eds. Elizabeth Fee and Daniel M. Fox. Univ. of CA, 1988.

Renewal record from PBS on the 1991 season for NOVA.

Risse, Guenter B. "Epidemics and History: Ecological Perspectives and Social Responses." *AIDS: The Burdens of History*. Eds. Elizabeth Fee and Daniel M. Fox. University of California Press, 1988.

Shilts, Randy. *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*. New York: Penguin Books, 1988.

United States. House. Subcommittee on the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies. *Hearings before a Subcommittee on Appropriations*. 101st Cong., 1st sess. Washington: GPO, 1988.

*TV Guide* 12 Feb. 1985: A-95.

Wicklein, John. "The Assault on Public Television." *Columbia Journalism Review* Jan.-Feb. 1986: 27-34.

Zimmerman, Patricia R. "SEVENTEEN: Race, Class, Sex and Spectatorship." *Afterimage* May 1986: 13-15.

### *Truth or Dare. Paris Is Burning*

### Truth or "realness"

by Jack Waters

from *Jump Cut*, no. 37, July 1992, pp. 72-73

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1992, 2006

On a recent lecture engagement I was at Bowdoin College, the volatility of representation issues became glaringly apparent in a discussion following LINDA, LES AND ANNIE, a documentary depicting a female-to-male sex change. Several women in the audience took exception to Livingston's claim to be able to speak both for men and for the lesbian point of view from which she/he evolved. Jenny Livingston, director of PARIS IS BURNING, implies being a lesbian (*Outweek* No. 94) and Madonna does not but says she's had "lesbian experiences." The two women's recent films have in common representing the cultures of gay men and/or people of color. In Livingston's case, this mix of cultures is that of the voguers who comprise the subject of PARIS IS BURNING, and in Madonna's the background chorus and dancers from the Blond Ambition Tour, the topic of TRUTH OR DARE. While both directors may be giving experience and exposure to the individuals from whom they draw material, each director has much more to gain materially as privileged white members of this society.

Both women have achieved a level of relative success (Madonna far more so than Livingston) in areas dominated by men, and that fact is a testament to their intelligence, strength and determination. But some disturbing questions linger. Do the two films' success depend on the entertainment industry's exploiting a sensibility in a way to which the originators of that sensibility have little access. Given their expository formats, how much do the two films reveal of the inequity of such a system?

Livingston as a lesbian may speak from the perspective of a minority in that respect. However, Madonna is in no way stigmatized as a sexual or racial minority, though she is quite marvelously outspoken about counter-establishment views on gay issues and other body/gender political subjects. In some of her on-stage attitude and behavior, she might however be viewed as exuding a lower middle class sensibility and could conceivably speak as someone from working class origins if for no other reason than for the garbage-eating period she endured in New York as a struggling performer. Livingston is of upper middle class, Bel Air California origins and the niece of director Alan Pakula, yet she never mentions these Hollywood connections.

While Madonna's TRUTH OR DARE success depends on the perception of

intimacy and the self-revelation of her "private life," Livingston's PARIS IS BURNING relies on an attempt to obscure and distance her persona from the work. In the *Outweek* interview she mentioned that she feels too close to her own life to make a film about it. She said,

"The more the gay community tries to pin other gay people to do what it wants them to do, the more individual gay artists will feel they have to flee from the gay community."

In the context of the article, her stated feelings imply that her film be divorced from a political reading with no obligation to any community except that of a general public (read mainstream). The fact that she refused to show PARIS IS BURNING at a Lesbian and Gay Film festival expressing her concerns about the film's ghettoization in a gay milieu (*NY Newsday*) speaks more to marketing concerns than aesthetics. Now that the film is in mainstream distribution, she faces a concern about ghettoization regardless of the fact that only through the gay festival circuit (San Francisco International, New York International, New York Experimental) did PARIS IS BURNING originally gain visibility.

*The Village Voice* mentioned that a new soundtrack by the pop group Deelite would accompany the film in its major distribution. It will have come a long way from Harlem of the mid 80s. The film will be relegated into the realm of the entertainment industry. The film's popular and commercial success benefits the director far more than its subjects for the simple reason that she is white and well connected and they are not. The film's business dealings, often seen as peripheral, affect its integrity both as social commentary and documentary. Since the film's release, some of the performers have complained in print in the *New York Daily News* that they were misled about the payment for their participation. According to the *Daily News*, the very title, "Paris Is Burning," was stolen. It was the name of a drag ball whose creator was not even credited for it in Livingston's film.

PARIS IS BURNING is an affecting film that explores a social scene that has too long deserved recognition for the contributions it has made to contemporary culture. Jenny Livingston deserves credit for taking the initiative in presenting some of the creative personalities responsible for this culture, rather than taking surface elements and processing them for mainstream consumption as Madonna does. Nevertheless, I wish to make some observation about the film's formal approach. Even without prior knowledge of the director's white middle class background and her family ties to the Hollywood film milieu, a tenuous anthropological presence is felt. The presence of an off-camera director/interviewer underscores the subjects' status as "Other." This device has the effect of distancing the observer (and the director) to the extent that the film presents the ball queens as anthropological subjects rather than as people. The film in fact screened at the Margaret Mead Film Festival.

A central problem lies in the film's inherently misleading documentary approach. The documentary says, "This is truth. What you are seeing is 'real.'" To postulate any work of art as a precise representation of actuality is always questionable, especially since cinema takes as its base the photographic, so that the documentary nature of the medium is assumed. To direct, shape and control the point of view is part of what makes a work "Art." Pretending or intimating that the authoritative manipulation does not exist is dishonest and verges more on mere artifice. That

PARIS IS BURNING (like many documentaries) lacks any reference to this point is particularly ironic in light of the concept of "realness" which permeates it (them).

Livingston is wise to allow the subjects the narrative voice rather than to impose a detached voice over. The immediate effect is one of the Ball Queen's prerogatives in her own realm. One wonders though whether this tone of candor is also a stylistic device used to hide the implicitly dictatorial nature of the documentary narrative form? Bold titles are inserted which act as headings for sections that define the terminology of the Balls, thus imposing a systematic structure comprehensible to a white mindset, which might not necessarily be inherent in the language of the Ballroom. Perhaps this need for codification relates to the surface hierarchy of the Ball categories and the transient "realness" that would appear to embrace (bind) them. But because the film does not greatly expand or challenge the standard documentary format, it cannot provide a deeper interpretation of the situation. The linear, commodity-conscious Eurocentric gaze tends towards a constrictive hierarchical perspective. The editorial choices heighten our awareness of the subjects' "imitation" of western values. PARIS IS BURNING does not particularly engage itself with potentially Afrocentric values recalcitrant in the collective unconscious. Examples of this are the tribal aspect of the Houses and the shamanistic attributes of the transvestite Mothers common in many nature cultures. The importance of the ritual of walking a ball in transcending systematic oppression is there if one seeks it, but the film gives the prominent impression that balls merely imitate a fashion show — emulate a "lifestyle."

Where the commoditization of the black gay condition may be subtle in Livingston's film, Madonna is in many ways more direct. The vérité form in which Madonna presents her TRUTH OR DARE also invites questions as to the matter of control and honesty in projecting a media image. Certainly the film shows enough footage of Madonna's "unflattering" side, and concert footage is spare enough to narrowly avoid the generic pigeonhole of the "Documentary." However one must still consider that the primary purpose of the film's release is to make money—after all this is not made for the Margaret Mead Film Festival — hence the proselytizing of the Madonna myth is seen here as a process of concealment through transferal and mystification.

This is subtlety evident in her exploitation of the exotiphobia/ exotiphebia dichotomy which so obsesses our western culture. Whereas the exposure of unorthodox sexuality might be a revelation to the target audience to which Madonna directs her mass appeal, the psycho-sexual dynamics of race which Madonna exploits is still not being dealt with as directly as it could/should. For example, while the stereotypes of female vulnerability and sexual strength are being "fucked around with," their relation to white exploitation does not go far beyond surface titillation.

Equally imperious is the "Motherly" attitude towards her "all ethnic" troupe of dancers. Since she is so clearly the boss, and a white one at that, the mistress/slave association is unavoidable. One thinks of a benevolent Scarlet O'Hara dominating the loving and beloved servants of the plantation. Her image in this context is easily read as a reiteration of the Great White God(dess) symbol we are all so tired of. Madonna emulates the "ethnicity" of her background performers while retaining her white status. Note the impact of the visual contrast of Madonna in her

heightened blond whiteness against the background of all that black skin and hair. Standing out prominently she symbolizes a privileged status, which can only be held by depriving others.

This kind of usurpation of style from non-white performers is nothing new. Her admitted crossover success came with her first video when audiences realized the white face behind the heavily R&B influenced sound. But one hopes for more from her implied goal of reforming the music industry. She said it wouldn't be homophobic when she's through with it and she has recognized the indivisibility of racial and economic oppression from the fight against sexism and homophobia. Hopefully now she'll focus on the complexity of the interplay between race and economics as well as the sexuality which she is so directly confronting. She'd do well to disassociate her identity with the stereotypical role as female performer. She herself has suggested producing James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, an early work by a gay writer of color whose posthumous exposure has been long overdue.

---

[To top](#)   [Current issue](#)   [Archived essays](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)

# The New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival

by Edith Becker

from *Jump Cut*, no. 37, July 1992, p. 74

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1992, 2006

We view our bodies with our minds. We fed our minds on bodies. Sarah Schulman and Jim Hubbard have curated the New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival since 1987. At that time theft operative factor was experimental. Now with the state's tremendous financial cut to the arts and vicious attacks on gay, lesbian, sexual and political artists, the Festival increasingly has become an important exhibitor for scarcely screened films. The festival is also a memorial to AIDS victims. Many films screened are by men who have died from the virus and many more films present people with AIDS.

One of the Festival's goals has been to unite lesbians, gay men, and a full range of concerns. The annual festival has included recent films, 16mm, super-8mm, old films, silent films, historic films, encompassing an array of topics — from AIDS demonstrations to pastoral settings to comedy. The following two articles review the 1989 Festival. They express two different sensibilities that the Festival helps bring together. Jennifer Montgomery reviews with a candid personal response to the films; Daryl Chin contemplates his choices with an aesthetic model in mind.

Whereas the 1989 Festival contained an eclectic mix of films, the 1990 Festival devoted a large number of films to the African American Gay Male experience. Every year the house sells out. These reviews explain why. The films chosen for the Festival are honest and show the directors' personal commitment to the work. These films send you away thinking about sexual politics or the problems of fun. The Festival, its staff, films and filmmakers said for victory over repressive forces and a hope for all of us to keep struggling with our visions.

For information about the festival or touring it in your area, contact the New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival, c/o Anthology Film Archives, 32-34 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10003.

# Lesbian viewing and perversity

by Jennifer Montgomery

from *Jump Cut*, no. 37, July 1992, pp. 74-78

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1992, 2006

The Third Annual Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival, organized by Sarah Schulman and Jim Hubbard, brings together three practices that are under serious reconsideration: making films (as opposed to video), making experimental work, and being gay.

The practice of filmmaking outside of the industry has become prohibitively expensive and rarefied in the face of inflation, cuts in funding, and the advent of video, with the concomitant closure of labs and discontinuation of film stocks. However, as a result of the increased interest in semiotics and media studies, more and more young filmmakers are entering the field.

While the protean concept of the "experimental" film has in some respects expanded in recent years, it has not been exempt from the restrictive economic and political pressures of the Reagan era. *Being* an experimental filmmaker is not a financially viable option. The small portion of monies available to us are continually shrinking, and it is tempting to compromise sensibility and ethics in order to get a little piece of the pie. On the other hand, experimental film has a tremendously rich and complex history that is being further enriched by the current interest in theories of representation, and the urgency and activism of some filmmakers who are committed to fighting the conservative backlash in this country.

It is the intersection of the above aesthetic and economic concerns with lesbian and gay experience that make this film festival a provocative, often inspiring event. While many people attended the films primarily because of their lesbian and gay content, the audience also represented experimental film fans whose sexualities run the whole gamut, and must have as much to do with emulsion as with flesh or gender. Recently lesbians and gays have created many fora for ourselves, and our voices have proliferated in the face of AIDS, censorship, and age-old repression. We have also responded to more positive forces at work amongst us, including new discourses on desire that have entered both cinematic and sexual practice. When suddenly presented with a veritable cornucopia of our own making, we are equally aware that our rights to expression are always already threatened and that our identities have been forged in perversity: in a learned knowledge and mapping of the excesses of heterosexual society.

"Perversity" is a difficult term insofar as it has often been used to strip us of our

individual dignity. But like "queer," "dyke," "faggot," and "promiscuity," the way to empowerment seems to be to take these terms for our own. The times are perverse, as is our response: to speak loudly and even joyously of our own sexuality in the face of nullification.

In addition to enabling us to read the subtexts of what mainstream culture says it's doing, perversity makes us mindful of, and resistant to, the trade-offs involved in taking up either of the two positions culture has to offer: to speak from the margins, where the possibility of speech is always at risk, or to speak from the mainstream, where speech is always mitigated by the status quo.

There is perversity ingrained in the lesbian experience of mainstream viewing, and, by inference, in any lesbian filmmaking. People who have grown up performing excavations on the heterosexual hegemony to find the homosexual meaning embedded therein are inherently critical viewers. We work hard to get our money's worth in every Hollywood plot. Our pleasure has been to find ourselves where we are not supposed to exist. To find meaning, no less positive imagery, in baroque repression is the ultimate hermeneutic exercise, but it is also the ultimate paranoid experience. After all, what do hermeneutic practices and paranoia have in common? They find meaning everywhere.

This is where perversity lies: In trying to judge the quality of film that is not only about, but perhaps embraces lesbianism, we are often divided between wanting to support any efforts at self-representation in an impoverished lexicon vs. the critical faculties so finely honed in our history of looking for hidden messages in the movies. What do we feel when we are relieved of our duties as cinematic sleuths and told to just sit back and enjoy the sight of ourselves in broad daylight? When the movie industry's layers of denial are the structure in which we understand ourselves, many react with great ambivalence to women's films that dispense with the usual narrative gratifications and the aesthetics of big-budget film.

Experimental film has traditionally been an underground haven for male homosexuality — witness such luminaries as Andy Warhol and Kenneth Anger — and is a phenomenon directly related to the multi-million dollar underground film industry of gay porn.

The history of lesbian spectatorship lies even further underground, buried in total invisibility or in the distortions of a male-dominated field. So, I believe that the cultural baggage that lesbians bring to work by and about themselves makes experimental lesbian film controversial as much because it is "experimental" as because it is lesbian.

I went to this festival with the specific desire to see how lesbian relationships are played out in experimental film, and so I will focus on some of the films that gratified my desire. My list is by no means comprehensive. There were at least 22 films by women and even more that contained lesbian content, and I am only covering five.

One of the most interesting films was also the only feature-length piece included in the festival: Chantal Akerman's *LES RENDEZ-VOUS D'ANNA*. This film may be a semi-autobiographical portrait: "Anna" is a filmmaker who travels from one European city to another presenting her work. She spends a great deal of time alone in hotel rooms placing unsuccessful calls to a mysterious woman in Italy. In

one city she has a sexual encounter with a lonely blonde man. They do not connect, rather seem to speak past each other in an isolated void. In another city Anna meets up with her mother, and they spend the night together in a hotel room. Once her mother is in bed, Anna approaches the bed fully nude, and, lying close by her mother's side, relates to her the story of her love affair with a woman (presumably the one she keeps trying to reach in Italy). The mother lies very still throughout, and at the end tells her daughter she cannot imagine what being with another woman would be like. Afterward Anna curls her body around her mother, and we are left to catch our breaths after the overpowering intimacy and taboo of this incestuous coming-out scene.

Anna next arrives in Paris, where she lives, and is met there by a boyfriend. When they return to his room he becomes ill. It appears that it is her absences that have made him sick. Anna tries to care for him, driving out into a barren suburb late at night to buy aspirin and later covering his body with hers to warm his chills, but the whole scene is irremediably sad. Finally, Anna returns to her apartment, lies on her own bed, and listens to a string of lost voices on her answering machine, one of which is that of the woman she has been trying to reach in Italy.

The film is a painful, leisurely portrait of the loneliness experienced both in solitude and in the presence of people you love. Lesbian relationship here is about distance: the geographical distance between countries, the distance experienced over the telephone wires, the distance between the non-intersecting paths of two women's lives, and the generational distance between mother and daughter, for whom confronting the daughter's lesbianism is only one small step to bridge the gap of the years that separate them.

Chantal Akerman is famous for the elegant minimalism of her films: the uncluttered camera work and the stripped-down plot. The minimalism of Akerman's films is what enables us to see clearly the sexual economies at work, and thus is a good strategy for making a powerful lesbian film. None of Akerman's films are purely devoted to lesbian relationship; her characters have many modes of being: being with women, being with men, being alone, being on the road, etc. But it is the cleanliness of Akerman's films that enables us to confront this multiplicity, and lesbianism as well, head-on, and that has made her, despite her own protestations, an intensely sought-after filmmaker in the lesbian film circuit.

Another kind of minimalism is at work in Lisa Laquier's *MÜLL* (German for trash). If we take away plot and leave only the sex scene, we can heap upon it all the campy details and narrativity we desire: love-making, after all, has a beginning, a middle, and an end. *MÜLL* features two nuns fucking on the spartan bed of a convent cell. Accompanied by an insistent musical crescendo, one nun is stripped of all but her wig, and the sex is raw and graphically shot. While she and the other nun go at it, the wig moves up and down on her head with a life of its own. The film ends when the two nuns come. Everybody gets what they want in *MÜLL*. Despite the fact that lesbian nuns is an old, old story, *MÜLL* is so dirty and unromantic (shot in super-8 with dingy lighting) that there's enough perversity for Catholics and non-Catholics alike to last until the Second Coming. The film has no masquerade of flowery sentiments, eternal love, or guilt behind which the libido might hide.

One of the frustrations of much lesbian film viewing is the endless soap opera of plot and foreplay that only sometimes lead to sexual gratification. *MÜLL* dispenses

unapologetically with foreplay and dialogue. In view of the complaints that are leveled against mainstream and experimental work: that lesbians deserve more hot sex scenes, and that women deserve to get turned on by movies by and about themselves, it would seem that good pornography is what many lesbians want.

HOW TO KILL HER by Ana Maria Simo is a beautifully shot, black and white film about the obsession of one woman (played by Ela Troyano) for another woman who has spurned her. The film begins with a long, panoramic shot along Manhattan's East River. The camera finally comes to rest on the bedraggled Troyano, who is lying asleep on a park bench. An upbeat Latin song accompanies this scene, setting an ironic tone for the film. Troyano awakes and seems to take up where she left off before sleep, writing on a crumpled sheet of paper a list of various methods by which she might dispose of the woman who has not reciprocated her love. A voice-over narrator describes Troyano's murderous obsession, and we are told that it is exacerbated by the fact that she never slept with the object of her desire.

There are flashbacks to a coy scene between the two women, Troyano playing the piano and the other woman turning her back on both Troyano and the camera when she takes off her shirt. Troyano moves from her park bench to her therapist's office, where the voice over of the therapist further describes Troyano's condition. While listening to Troyano, the therapist impatiently consult two watches, one on each wrist, an ironic gesture that suggests the futility of "curing" this sexual obsession. Finally, Troyano ends up back on the street, returning to the waterfront — a dangerous place she knows she should avoid. It is night, and she is leaning heavily on a cane and limping, harassed by every man she encounters along the way. Troyano seem determined to follow her own self-destructive course of (in)action.

HOW TO KILL HER could be seen as a romanticization of obsession, given the allure of both the star and the Manhattan skyline. It's certainly no morality tale of the dangers of obsessive behavior. If it were we would get to see the violent results of Troyano's destructive path, the evidence being, perhaps, someone's corpse floating up on the East River. But there's no resolution here: life could go on in this vein indefinitely. Perhaps the ironic tone of HOW TO KILL HER is an admission of the impossibility of showing the full complexity of personal suffering within the given narratives of conflict and resolution.

The film's portrait of lesbian love gone awry also flies in the face of the politically correct pressure on lesbians to represent ourselves in a positive light, to give lesbianism a good name. It is a scary proposition to display an excesses of lesbian sexuality to a public who has traditionally seen us as only capable of narcissistic excess, in the event that our "condition" is allowed to metastasize long enough to be seen at all. Finally, the unresolved nature of obsession in this film could be read as the return of the repressed: lesbianism itself a symptom that won't go away, and that refuses the reductive interpretations of a culture fixated on medical categorization. Progressing through the psychosexual quagmire of lesbian identity may mean avoiding *any* of the resolutions that The Movies have thus far had to offer.

Catherine Saalfeld's INFIDEL is deeply invested in the issues of the lesbian look and desire. The central characters of INFIDEL are a black woman who was once a

fashion model and her lover, a white woman. The white woman is played by the filmmaker and her sister. Actually, whether Saalfeld and her sister are supposed to be a unified character is up for grabs: Saalfeld is heard instructing her sister on how to play the role (i.e. how to be a lesbian), and there are moments when the two appear on screen at once.

The black woman recounts some of her experiences of racism in the modeling industry. The problems of body image and ethnicity are brought up not only by the black woman but a host of other women, all white, who talk about modeling, their looks, and appear nude or clothed looking at themselves and sometimes touching one another.

The clearest voice in the film is that of a woman with a large, wine-colored birthmark on her face, who discusses her family's attempt to get rid of it and the lore of birthmarks. TV and magazine imagery of models of all races are interspersed throughout. The lesbian relationship, and the entire film, in fact, takes place in a series of dorm room interiors. Consequently, while the issues under discussion are disturbing and the characters evidently in some conflict with themselves, an air of privilege, safety, and leisure pervades the film. Everyone spends a great deal of time looking at themselves, at each other, and looking at themselves looking at the camera. Sometimes their looks are pained and unresolved, such as when the black woman regards herself in the mirror, draws in blue grease pencil eyes where her own brown eyes are reflected, and then turns over the mirror to reveal a collection of disturbed, child-like scribbles of idealized ladies. But, by and large, the looks exchanged are more about girlish self-consciousness and a benign narcissism.

The split subject, the complexities of women desiring and criticizing each other, exoticism, and racism are all factors that diffuse our vision. In *INFIDEL* the problems of the specular gaze are subsumed in the pleasures of lesbian looking. I think that Saalfeld intended the black woman's story of escape from the modeling industry to be the central theme of her film, and a metaphor for all women's self reclamation. There are moments when the black woman's identity overflows the bounds of metaphor and she occupies a strong position in the film. In one section she is seen lounging on her bed watching a Phil Donahue show about modeling. While an emaciated black woman, the most celebrated model of the day, parades down the runway, and Donahue and a male fashion designer discuss the problem of how to disguise big butts, the woman viewing languorously devours spaghetti with her hands. The camera moves up her body caressingly, like an ad for Levis 501 jeans. Here the subject's sensual existence and her autonomy from TV's oppressive emanations are complete.

But most of the film strays from this woman's personal power, and subsumes her in the voracious desires of the white lesbian behind the camera. The black woman is surrounded by the pleasures and desires of white women in a white environment. The harem-like ambiance overwhelms and trivializes the very issues that *INFIDEL* purports to address. The sexual attentions that the white women shower on themselves and the black woman are truly seductive. But if this is what it means for lesbians to reclaim visual pleasure, then I'm not sure I'm ready for pleasure yet. *INFIDEL* could have been really powerful if Saalfeld had not mitigated the film's sexual pleasures with the false consciousness of a racial issue

that isn't given the attention it deserves.

I want to end by saying that the 3rd New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival had a specific intricacy for me because I was a participant as well as a spectator. Not only was my own film HOME AVENUE screened, I appeared in Peggy Ahwesh's film MARTINA'S PLAYHOUSE. The concerns I've addressed here about how lesbians see themselves in experimental film were literalized when I actually did see myself in the movies. While my own film is not about a lesbian relationship (it is an autobiographical account of a rape), Ahwesh's film is.

MARTINA'S PLAYHOUSE is introduced by the star Martina, a five year-old who stares at the camera and spells her name out loud. Thereafter, the film is divided into three parts that are intercut with each other. One part involves Martina at age three with her mother Diane, enacting a variety of role reversal games, each one taking turns at playing a baby and a mother. Another part is hand-processed imagery of flowers, with a voice over reciting theory from Bataille and Lacan about desire, lack, and the genital sexuality of flowers. Sometimes the voice is that of a woman, sometimes a man, and sometimes the child Martina, stumbling through the dense text with prompting from Ahwesh. There are "talking flowers" in one scene, snapdragons whose petal jaws are manipulated by a human hand.

The third pan is a scene between myself and Ahwesh, me in front of the camera, her behind it. Like Martina and Diane, I am playing a game: I am trying to seduce the filmmaker. I am also venting my frustration with the camera that she has positioned between us. At one point I scream, but since it is, after all, a movie, I tell Ahwesh I didn't feel comfortable with it (implying that I might try again later and get it better, more authentic). I tell her of my fantasy of getting down on my hands and knees and begging her to sleep with me. The camera and the audience there implied are both the reason for my being there at all and the prophylaxis Ahwesh uses to maintain her neutrality. At one point I contemplate using the microphone as a sex toy, an act that would adapt a no-win situation to my own sexual needs.

Ahwesh juxtaposes the mother-daughter games with a scene of lesbian seduction in such a way that the two kinds of relationship slide over onto one another. At one point Diane plays at being baby. Diane-the-baby is hungry and tearful, and demands milk when Martina-the-mother tries to satisfy her by reading her a story. Martina then offers her "child" her breasts, and Diane suckles one nipple, then the other (according to Martina's fantasy of lactation, one nipple offers milk, the other juice). Like Anna's coming out scene with her mother in Akerman's film, this scene in MARINA'S PLAYHOUSE challenges our notion of the proper boundaries between mother and daughter. On the other hand, while there is freedom in play and pleasure between women, the implication in Ahwesh's film is that the formation of feminine sex roles in the mother-daughter bond will haunt our relations with women until our dying day.

However, from day one there is also a third term: it is the fact of representation and, in cinema, the camera's gaze. Martina at age three is as aware of the camera's presence, albeit a benevolent one, as any adult, and her relation to it is more overflowing with meaning than any one theory can encompass. While Ahwesh employs theory, it, like the other pans of the film, has a discrete place, a world of its own (in this case, the world of flowers), and she leaves her viewers to figure out for themselves their relation to theory, and theory's relation to the rest of the film.

All of the films I have mentioned provide visions of lesbian relationship that elude the limits of mainstream narrative convention. Whether or not we choose to accept these visions is our prerogative: that we have a prerogative is the most important point, and one I believe that is the operating principle of the Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival.

---

[To top](#)    [Current issue](#)    [Archived essays](#)    [Jump Cut home](#)

# Super-8 films and the aesthetics of intimacy

by Daryl Chin

from *Jump Cut*, no. 37, July 1992, pp. 78-81

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1992, 2006

Sexual politics is fraught with extreme problems. The issue concerns behavior that is indivisibly personal. That committing certain acts, certain forms of behavior, and certain intimacies can be subject to scrutiny, regulation, and legal surveillance is one of the paradoxes at the heart of human society. For this reason, feminists and gay activists have proclaimed the radicalization of a political agenda to be conjoined with the individualized perspectives of psychosexual prospects.

In recent years, there have been many attempts to establish aesthetic ventures based on aspects of personal politics. In the 1970s, the revival of feminism brought about a number of artistic endeavors that involved work by women. There were major film festivals, as well as film journals, film distributors, and film theoreticians. Though perhaps less publicized in terms of the popular press, these endeavors continue, creating a lively alternative film scene.

Right now, activity seems to be escalating in the area of lesbian and gay media. For example, within a six-month period in New York City in 1989, there were the New Festival of Lesbian and Gay Films, the Third Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival, a festival of lesbian and gay video work at Downtown Community Television, and How Do I Look?, a lesbian and gay media conference. As Amy Taubin noted in her review of the video selections of How Do I Look? in *The Village Voice* (October 17, 1989), there was remarkably little overlap in all these lesbian and gay events.

This means that there is, at present, an enormous variety and volume of self-defined gay media. The importance of self-definition is not to be overlooked. One of the issues in much of these works concerns honesty, the psychological and the social honesty to claim an identity as a gay person. This has been especially problematic for artists, given the intense social pressures involved in the commerce of art. The possibility of homophobia, of prejudicial exchanges, of condescension remains omnipresent for gay artists, particularly in terms of the commercial media. For this reason, many gay artists working in media have acceded to the importance of alternative media, with modes of production, access, and patterns of exhibition defined in ways that counter the commercial system. Impressively, within the last few years, this counter-cinema of gay activism has been able to generate its own

cohesive alternative system.

The issue of intimacy is very important, because, as mentioned, the politics involved in gay liberation strike at areas considered most private. Our civilization has been based on the situation of the dichotomy of that which is socially acceptable to express and that which is socially imperative to repress.

The determination to acknowledge the unconscious was the ideological imperative in Surrealism. The continuity between Surrealism and sexual politics has been problematic. The expression of libidinous sexual desires, in the work of André Breton, René Magritte, Paul Delvaux, Man Ray, and Hans Bellmer, was a hallmark of Surrealism, but the definition was demarcated by the boundaries of the male perspective.

The ways in which the body can be apprehended and distorted provided Surrealism with one of its most consistent motifs. In the paintings of Delvaux, for example, there are the urban plazas and streetscapes, which often open out into deserts or beaches; street lamps might be on in broad daylight, and the people walking through these landscapes are women in lingerie or in the nude while the men are always clothed. The photo tableaux of Hans Bellmer, under the title of *La Poupée*, take sections of female mannequins, and place those simulated body parts in pictures of construction and destruction, often against backgrounds of domestic surfaces such as lace tablecloths, striped sheets, the corner of a room.

The ambiguity of this sexual imagery, its aggressive violence, has been one of the reasons for the power and humor in Surrealism. This is particularly true in the case of the filmmaker most associated with Surrealism, Luis Buñuel. Buñuel's career began with the image of the slicing of an eye, an extremely graphic depiction of the trauma of the body. Expressing that trauma, the trauma of repression and negation, provided Buñuel with the source of much of his provocation: the lovers grasping each other while wallowing in mud in *L'AGE D'OR*, the paraphernalia for feminine hygiene in *DIARY OF A CHAMBERMAID*, the tongue of the Devil enticing the saint in *SIMNON OF THE DESERT*, the bloodstain on the sheet in *BELLE DE JOUR*, the amputation of the leg in *TRISTANA*. The expression of *l'amour fou*, a primary focus for Surrealist art, was always within the confines of heterodox sexuality, with the scenario codified in terms of male desire and female objectification. (It's worth noting that the term "object of desire," so ubiquitous in radical psychology and film theory, became the title of Buñuel's last movie.)

Surrealism provided a basis for an alternative cinema, and one founded on psychosexual imagery. In addition to Buñuel, another beneficiary of the patronage of collectors such as the Vicomte de Noailles, was Jean Cocteau, whose *LE SANG D'UN POETE* would provide inspiration for the U.S. avant-garde cinema, where the prominence of gay artists is undeniable.

The conjunction of a political idea with a personal sexuality has resulted in an alternative film practice and a politicized gay consciousness. This has been the occasion for much of the work in *How Do I Look?* as well as the recent Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival.

The accessibility of video and small-gauge film making has enabled many artists to work in the media with the ease of a pen, a typewriter, a home computer, fulfilling

the ideal once expressed by Alexandre Astruc for the *caméra-stylo*.

I would like to concentrate on some of the super-8 films shown at the Third Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival, discussing how the filmmakers use the resources and the limitations of the small-gauge film to define a style, which, in turn, provides a formal correlative to very specific thematic concerns. These concerns are tied to ideas of intimacy, of private experience, and of introspection. Before I get into that, I'd like to discuss the difference between video and super-8 film, because, though there are similarities, there are many differences which account for technical and formal distinctions.

While it is true that both super-8 and video (in the recent development of camcorders and VHS home units) are easily accessible, highly flexible, and readily available, there are some rather obvious technical constraints that become important when aesthetic considerations come into play. Obviously, the look that is possible in video is vastly different from the look possible in super-8. In terms of the viewing conditions, the video image is the source of light, while in film the image is projected from behind the viewer. In super-8, the length of possible projection is limited. Super-8 was developed as a home media: it was assumed that the place for viewing would be a room in a residential dwelling. The super-8 projected image is necessarily softer than larger film gauges and the focus of super-8 projection, is restricted to close range. Most of the best work in super-8 takes these factors into account, and uses these factors to consolidate the specific viewpoint.

One of the most important features of super-8 in the past decade and a half was the development of a reasonable sound technology. Once that happened, the possibility for narrative and for commentary was established, and super-8 became a genuine alternative medium for many artists.

This can be seen in Peggy Ahwesh's *MARTINA'S PLAYHOUSE*. The film is an extended encounter with Martina, a little girl. The visual field of the film comprises the space of play: the interior of a room, with toys and children's books all around. Martina's forthright presence, her extroverted commentary, and her bantering with her mother, create the sense of "polymorphous perversity," the limited arena of uninhibited play. Yet this arena is necessarily enclosed by the limits of the scale of childhood. The circumscription of the visual space is entirely appropriate to the parameters of Martina's play space. *MARTINA'S PLAYHOUSE* is a bright and provocative film: the provocation comes from the uninhibited exuberance of Martina herself. The intense but softened colors of super-8 give the film a fantasy aura, which helps to accentuate the childlike intimacy of the film.

Provocation is important to Lisa Laquier's *MÜLL*. The film uses cluttered, cropped, often choppy imagery to tell this concealed story of convent life. The foreshortened focus that is part of the mechanics of super-8 is used as a way to indicate the claustrophobia of the nuns' habitat. The space of the film becomes a shallow theatrical space against which sexual rituals are played out.

Of the performance-oriented super-8 films, Robert Hiltferty's *LE CIRQUE DU SIDA* is one of the most complex. A lament sung by Diamanda Galas accompanies rapidly edited images of the circus, in bursts of color and light. The precise flight of acrobats, the hustle-bustle of the clowns, and the exacting feats of the jugglers:

these glimpses are joined in a piercing rhythm, so that the images seem to flare up suddenly, as the music creates a counterpoint emphasizing loss.

Jennifer Montgomery's *HOME AVENUE* is a straightforward "confessional" of sexual trauma. Here, the limited range of super-8 accentuates the sense of closeness to the subject. Stylistically, there is the counterpoint of the bright images of suburbia, and the quietly commanding statements made on the soundtrack. The telephoto traveling shots seem to flatten out the distances of the suburban landscape. This suggests the possibility of something hidden, traumas trapped within the placid surfaces. If the focus of *MARTINA'S PLAYHOUSE* suggested a landscape of uninhibited play, the focus of *HOME AVENUE* depicts a landscape of hidden terrors, of fearful ravages in childhood.

Carl George's *DHPG MON AMOUR* is a deeply affecting account of a couple living with AIDS. The affliction of one of the partners is a source of great resolve. The usage of the experimental drug DHPG has become a daily ritual, part of the same daily routine of grocery shopping, cooking, watching television. Integrating the treatment into their lives, these two men show the courage with which many are now facing their lives. The commentary was recorded some time after the filming; the commentary details, without histrionics and without self-pity, the changes that occur over the course of the disease. The film is spare, lacking in adornment, unaffected, and this simplicity is, ultimately, the source of the film's power.

Jim Hubbard has been working in super-8, often with film that he develops himself. His aesthetic functions in part on that complete involvement. *ELEGY IN THE STREETS* is a lyrical assemblage centering on the AIDS crisis. There are reminiscences of a friend who died of AIDS, of demonstrations, and of activities by ACT-UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). *ELEGY IN THE STREETS* suggests the consolidation of the gay movement through the agency of this health crisis. Without spelling out the points in an obvious way, the film weaves disparate strands from the public to the personal to mesh into a picture of one aspect of current gay politics.

This sampling of the super-8 films that were included in the recent Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival was unfailingly interesting. The most effective films (*MARTINA'S PLAYHOUSE*, *HOME AVENUE*, *DHPG MON AMOUR*, *ELEGY IN THE STREETS*) dispensed with the usual trappings of "art" in order to convey events with urgency and acuity. In such cases, the films were works of advocacy, and the forcefulness of the films had much to do with the success of that advocacy.

This brings me to another point when dealing with "alternative" cinema in any way, the critic is often placed in the position of advocacy as well. To write on gay culture at this time is to take a political position. Prior to the severe onslaught of AIDS in the gay community, there were a number of contradictory positions in terms of gay cinema. For those with an interest in narrative cinema, there was the attempt to discern gay iconography within the cracks and crevices of the standard commercial cinema. But the lack of recognition for alternative viewpoints within the commercial cinema has meant that little narrative work in the movies has dealt with the issues that are now so urgently present for the gay community. Nevertheless, the history of "alternative" cinema has been founded on the assumption that alternative points of view have validity in terms of representation. When dealing with works of advocacy, the critical viewpoint on the films must

coincide with a political point of view. Quite frankly: is one sympathetic to a film about "progressive" childhood expressions of sexuality? Is one sympathetic to a film about the trauma of sexual molestation? Is one sympathetic to a film about living with "experimental" treatments for AIDS?

The incredible proliferation of gay media in the past few years has been the result of the increased politicization of the gay community in response to the AIDS crisis. For this reason, much of the work has been in easily accessible formats, such as video or super-8. And it would be unfair to judge this work in terms of aesthetics that did not take into account the intended effectiveness of the works. Do these films communicate the specific sociocultural messages that their creators intended? Do these films convey the essential aesthetic for which their creators were aiming? In short, do these films speak a truth?

At a symposium sponsored by The Museum of Modern Art in 1980, the late Arthur Bell asked four Hollywood producers about the progressive depiction of gay life, as opposed to the distorted and homophobic treatment in *CRUISING*. David Brown, probably the most seasoned Hollywood producer on the panel, answered firmly and decisively. He said that if *CRUISING* were a flop, that would be that. But if *CRUISING* were a hit and there were evidence that the mass audience wanted to see gay men depicted as psychopathic killers, then there would be more movies with gay men as psychopathic killers. Hollywood is a market mentality, and the only morality in Hollywood is whether the product will sell. Brown did not try to pretend to a political or an aesthetic point of view: it was strictly a matter of economics. There were options, and gay activists could attempt to influence public opinion, dissuading viewers from going to the movie, but, if people wanted to go, that would be the message of the movie. But "the bottom line" was operative, and that was the only arbiter of Hollywood's depiction of gay life.

At this time, there is an importance to empowerment, to self-assertion, to identification. The proliferation of gay media right now is an indication of the urgency of gay representation. There should be no delusion that this task of representation may still occur in circumstances which are defined in terms of "the bottom line," for the representation of gay reality is still a political act. In terms of the super-8 films, the sparseness, the unadorned directness, the simplicity of means, are the way of creating statements speaking right at the heart of current gay life. And these statements are necessarily intimate, as befits the situation of being gay.

The films at the Third Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival state the truth of gay politics: one must be true to oneself before one can confront the world honestly, forthrightly, and without shame. In the best of the super-8 films, this statement finds a formal correlative, combining to create unusually affecting and effective works.

### *Wild Life*

## Collaborative process and gay identity

by Gabriel Gomez

from *Jump Cut*, no. 37, July 1992, pp. 82-87

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1992, 2006

WILD LIFE (1985) by John Goss offers a curious mix of the documentary and the fictional. The video artist investigates the lives of two gay, fifteen-year old Latinos named Carlos and Cesar. These young Mexican Americans are immigrants to the United States. Goss felt an affinity with their dislocation in Anglo American culture. He too felt like an outsider among the Asian American youth of his childhood. From these similarities an affinity develops between the subjects of this work and the author, an affinity well suited to an interview format made documentary style. However the interaction between this adult artist, who has successfully integrated into Anglo-American culture, and two Chicano teenagers also incorporates resistance and even mutual suspicion. Goss foregrounds these tensions through juxtaposing documentary conventions and re-enactments exposed as fiction. He allows the teenagers to actively portray themselves through play, reconstructing their self-proclaimed "wild life."

Ultimately the object of investigation, these teenagers' "wild life," yields no detailed chronicle, as we might expect from a documentary work. Instead, under Goss' direction, a quasi-fictional narrative emerges about the young men's friendship and differences. The narrative reveals how both tradition and innovation affect this queer pair of immigrants' ideals of style and their communication. Strong personal relationships foster their secure identity. For these two young gay men, one cognizant of both their ethnicity and sexuality, and their strong sense of self-identity, which in turn enriches a diverse queer community.

The tape opens rather simply in a neutral studio space. Over the next forty minutes, interviews set in this studio give way to playful re-enactments, openly encouraged by John Goss, and move to staged events on the streets of Los Angeles. Props like toy telephones or chairs stand in for bus stop benches offer visual cues to fictional events, which inspire the "wild life" tableau Carlos and Cesar wish to portray. Goss, off-camera, questions first Cesar and then Carlos about themselves. The audience learns about their immigrant status, their ages, and their plans for the future. Goss has a specific interest in gay identity. He asks how long have they been out and how long they knew they were gay.

These crosscut interviews yield to a long take of Cesar and Carlos together. Here

they expand on the factual information just revealed. Through play the two talk on toy telephones about meeting to attend a party together. Carlos waits at a make-believe bus stop. Then the fiction moves outside the studio to a real bus stop. The edited shift emphasizes a contrast between the conventions of documentary and its propensity for real locations, which here are used by two teenagers for play, that is, fiction. Carlos' subsequent fictional meeting with Cesar occurs on the streets. As the camera follows them, their voices-over explain their predicament. Carlos must change into his wild clothes outside because his mother finds his style too effeminate.

This development from the studio scene, with Goss prompting to the wild life drama, staged outside by Cesar and Carlos, defines the videotape's form. Outside, the two engage playfully in such varied activities as cruising for men, changing clothes, meeting friends, arguing, or just "hanging out." In the studio they face Goss' interrogation about their style, about clothes, language, and even their relationship to gay male and mainstream commercial imagery. For example, Carlos saves the receipts of his clothes and haircut expenses, party invitations, flyers, fashion ads, even telephone numbers written on cards and matchbook covers. These are the visible residue, shown to us, of Carlos' "wild life." Under Goss' questioning, commercial culture emerges as an important determinant of "wild style."

Personal issues like sexual practices and preferences, home life, and even skipping high school, also figure prominently in these interview segments. Conversations between Carlos, Cesar, and Goss, begun in this setting, often become voice-over explanations of the re-enactments. In this way the audience learns how the teenagers cope with the restrictions faced by underage queers — including the vagaries of public transportation — in the occasionally hostile, yet largely indifferent world of Los Angeles. The youths are connected to a wider queer culture of drag queens and nightlife, but they find true comfort in the similarities of their ethnic backgrounds. At the end Cesar is seen alone in the studio applying phosphorescent make-up . Carlos then recites a poem of love. Ultimately, their self-assured sense of style insures that indeed they are actively representing their own "wild life."

Essential to any analysis of this work is the question of collaboration and its attendant complications of authority, control, and power. Goss the video artist is heard asking questions but never seen. This convention commonly occurs in documentary film and video. For example, Jean Rouch develops a similar relation between himself and his subjects in the film JAGUAR.[1][\[open notes in new window\]](#) There two African men speak both the dialogue and the voice-over, which explains Rouch's images. Also like Rouch in JAGUAR, Goss questions and explains his interest in the subjects of his work. More important, and with greater direction than in JAGUAR, Goss interrogates the youths directly, asking questions like an interviewer. Despite Goss' "invisibility," WILD LIFE develops around him and his deployment of video technology. Like Rouch's JAGUAR, this work creates the event it documents.

"Wild life" as defined by Cesar and Carlos remains their own strategy for living. We as viewers only see a small fraction of this representation or fiction. Unable to grant consent as legal adults, the youth's more wild actions, if there are any, remain

unseen. Goss participates in the representation of a "wild life" firmly entrenched in his role as a videomaker. However, his relation to his subjects grants them a safe space in which to define themselves and their relation to the document they inspire. This "enabling" aspect of the project gives the work greater credibility as an accurate representation. Carlos and Cesar do not participate in the tape as the object of an unknown curiosity. Instead the compromises between them and Goss establish visible fictions, which together represent their "wildlife."

Perhaps the best visualization of the relation between the video artist, his medium and his subjects is found in the metaphor of the title frame. The title WILD LIFE appears as a hole or a window and a frame. It masks yet intrigues the viewer at the beginning of the tape. The title serves as more than just an introduction and instigator of interest. Its form articulates the relation that will come into being between the artist, Goss, his subjects, Cesar and Carlos, and their self-described "wild life."

Video technology captures the images presented by these three. It also alters and obscures those images in its use of framing, editing, staging and most importantly here, in fomenting the actions seen. Video records a visual reality and then alters this vision. Individuals control the technology's use. More simply put, video can document the visual appearance, in this case of Cesar and Carlos. As such, it is a technology of representation wherein some aspects of that actuality remain, if only in a mythic sense. Goss does not alter the images rendered beyond using traditional conventions of lighting, framing, and editing. The frame is employed as the artist's primary means to compose and shape his subjects.

Carlos and Cesar become a conscious element in composing their own representation. The title's words, "wild life," serve as part of their self-styled image. The title acts as frame, focus, definition, and subject portrayal. The opening title frame literally shapes the subjects' habitat, a Los Angeles street, by the words in visual form. This very limited view hinders viewer's perception, and thus its style echoes a larger problem in the work. How can the youth's "reality" be found hidden in this urban jungle? Can this representation and the metaphorical understanding it offers of human "wild life" do more than mask or fetishize the tape's very young subjects? These boys underscore the difficulty of knowing and understanding something wild, something potentially tamed through the limiting means of video technology. They come into view semantically, metaphorically, and even visually as subjects seen through the screen of the words "wild life" and all its negative stereotypes. Goss and the two subjects join in this visual element at the works beginning in a sort of agreement.

The exchanges between Goss and the boys remain playful on both sides. At times Goss asks questions firmly related to his position in a gay male subculture, such as his questioning about the term "sister." The common term "sister" refers to the relation that exists between two gay men who generally do not engage in sexual relations with each other. They are often, though not necessarily, incompatible due to their preference for passive roles. In more recent times feminism's influence has made this kind of usage of female terms less acceptable. Addressing queer men as feminine is seen as an offensive extension of the devalued status accorded to women. The term "sister" extends from such perceived effeminacy; it knowingly plays on devalued feminine status as an element of camaraderie. Goss' insistence

on exploring the term's meaning and his frank questioning about the feelings these two teenagers express in its usage belies his knowledge of this historical shift.

The youth's response to Goss' line of inquiry about "sister" affirm the term "sister" as a token of affection. For them, the term denotes a concrete relationship already seen by the viewer. "Sister" does not imply a put down of women for these two. Rather it is a term that describes a special specific relationship, special since only they themselves will define it, and they will oppose the views expressed by Goss. Their use of "sister" undoubtedly relates to the wider queer culture.

Since the negative aspects of the term "queer" have been rejected so as to recuperate a former pejorative, so too the boys have reclaimed "sister" to describe their extraordinary friendship. When Goss tries to challenge their closed system of communication, he fails to rupture their conviction about the word's propriety. These two boys are clearly proud of their "sissy boy" ways. Undoubtedly, the negative connotation of "sister" reflects the larger society's views that equate gay with feminine. As the boy's friendship unfolds on the video screen we can see how positive the term "sister" can be. Goss discovers this in his questioning.

This friendship relation, at once visible and opaque, parallels the two boys' framing within the video. The opening sequences take place in the studio and use the conventions of an interview format. The boys are shot in close-up, one looking left, and the other right. Goss is only heard. Finally they appear together in the frame, seen from their knees up. This visual pairing accompanies their talking about the subject of the tape, their shared "wild life." They first define and introduce themselves separately. Only interaction, however, will reveal the limits, manner and form of their lifestyle. After this initial pairing, Cesar leaves the frame.

Carlos, now alone in the studio except for Goss' voice, prepares to meet his friend as they had arranged through a make-believe telephone call. The videotape jumps into the real location of the bus stop, as does Carlos, still alone. There Carlos' voice-over explains how he often waits for Cesar as we see an image of Carlos dancing to asynchronous music. The next shot reveals him alone in the studio again, talking about his knowledge of the L.A. bus system. Finally, back at the bus stop, with framing reminiscent of the initial pairing, Cesar enters from the right. The boys recognize each other with a kiss.

The visual inevitability of their union foregrounds the relation the two themselves describe. Such a form carries the videotape forward as the boys are continually seen separately in the studio with Goss' voice prodding them onward. Then they join, both in exterior locations and in studio shots, to reenact the events of their "wild life." Their visual separation, its minor visual suspense, and its ultimate payoff in their reunification give formal videographic shape to the boy's relation. We come to share their excitement in their moments of friendship. The narrative emphasis subtly subverts the primacy media places on sexual objectification. The boy's unity in the frame represents a bipolar ideal, at odds with the specularization of a single heroic phallic image. Suspense becomes built around their unity. These moments of unity are the site of the tape's most intense visual interest. The boy's mirror each other here but only after revealing differences specific to each individual. The myth of narcissus as an originating tale of self-love, which in mainstream social theory is often extrapolated to account for queer desire, is thereby destroyed.

Carlos and Cesar do not fall in love with an identical image, one crafted in an elaborate mix of suspense and idealization, one that ends in romance and marriage. Rather they form a friendship founded in diversity and in similarity and without explicit sexual gratification. The stereotype of raging queer libido is displaced by a pair of "sisters." The videotape echoes this displacement in its structure of individual shots, often close-ups taped in an interview format. These then lead into the boy's re-enacting joint activities, which expose the complexity of friendship and its recognition of similarities and differences. This recognition, in turn, generates mutual pleasures.

Despite this specificity much is left unspoken. This relationship appears sexless. A gay viewer would implicitly assume this term "sister." No explanation for those outside gay circles, those presumably unfamiliar with such a usage, corrects a possible misunderstanding. Goss asks questions about the friendship, yet does not mention sexual relations. Nor do the two boys volunteer to clarify. Any immediate correlation between sex and friendship is thereby avoided. There may be legal reasons for this, since the subjects are both minors.

The ambiguity, however, also permits gay audiences to recognize a close personal friendship without catering to common stereotypes where gay men are seen as coldly sexual predators. A bridge of understanding is crossed over a cultural divide. At the same time, this depiction does not expose or betray the special sense of a gay subculture to a wider, possibly hostile world. That world is permitted to infer whatever wild intentions it will. Cesar and Carlos are open about friendship and their sexuality. The details are not essential to their image. They are gay and friends. Any other information is superfluous.

The title WILD LIFE requires closer examination at this juncture. In the video the term emerges as one adopted by the teenagers to describe their own lives. Yet the tide encourages other connotations. According to dominant culture, the lives on view may indeed appear "wild." Another meaning of this term, one that describes natural fauna, crosses this more explicitly moral meaning to give this term an added edge. From the new point of Anglo-American, heterosexual culture, gay, Latino, and teenage are triply "other." These gay Chicano teenagers have very little opportunity to represent themselves to the larger, more powerful world. Their choice of the term "wild life" to present themselves implies the larger world's view and norms and probable censure. Yet the dominant culture's meanings are subverted in the process of how these two subjects practice their sexuality. Michel Foucault described social control over sexuality in the following way:

"Power over sex is exercised in the same way at all levels. From top to bottom, in its over-all decisions and its capillary interventions alike, whatever the devices or institutions upon which it relies, it acts in a uniform and comprehensive manner, it operates according to the simple and endlessly reproduced mechanisms of law, taboo, and censorship."<sup>[2]</sup>

These teenagers are underage. As a result their sexuality falls within the domain of the law, or it reverts to the prerogatives of the family, who remain unseen. In the family, and in wider society, taboos keep a check on their behavior, as when Carlos changes clothes on the street. Censorship describes the dearth of any

representation that might approximate their view of themselves. Thus Cesar proudly maintains a photo collection of without any explicit gay male sexuality. The boy's deliberate recognition of barriers to sexual practice and awareness of dress and its effects on gender and social propriety show a clear recognition of the boundaries they face in self-expression. More important, their desire to break these strictures aligns their proclaiming themselves in a "wild life."

They display this knowledge in their reactions to the process of being videotaped. When Carlos awaits Cesar at the bus stop, he dances alone in public space. Clearly he is aware of the camera. The staging of this event promulgates the idea that he would do this normally while waiting for his friend. In this regard, the friend's kiss of recognition becomes not just as act of recognition, but a sign of defiance against dominant heterosexist culture. As in Rouch's work on three African men, this video instigates actions. The kiss signifies recognition and defiance and it becomes a sign of close friendship within the context of the work. Does the act of video taping play any role in its occurrence?

Tensions between the portrayal of actual events and staged ones permeate this work. In another instance, Goss' voice specifically calls for an argument. The teenagers together in frame in the studio respond in an obviously feigned manner. Their voices carry over into the street, where a more realistic argument proceeds. There, a prominent framing device, using this location's railroad lines, shapes the image. Following the laws of perspective, the tracks recede in the distance forming a triangle. In the course of the argument, Cesar and Carlos cross over these lines, separating, then joining within the triangle. Finally the dispute resolves in synch sound images. They join arm in arm from within the triangular perspective delimited by the rail lines.

Reenactments question video technology's ability to record actual events and also to instigate them. We have no clear evidence, indeed no way of knowing whether or not these two boys are play-acting solely for the camera. Carlos can be dancing for himself, passersby, the video maker or the presumed audience.

Goss foments a fight in the studio. He asks the youths to get angry the way they often do, implying that he knows their disputes. Yet when Goss cuts to an argument outdoors, suddenly the words are lost. The clear if unenthusiastic argument of the studio becomes replaced by an angry, confusing, silent series of actions. Now the audience remains ignorant of what caused this "unstaged" argument Is this how the boys wish to portray themselves or are they concerned with some other issue? They respond to Goss' video surveillance in their own fashion. The videotape records these two events. The editing obscures the nature of the arguments by crossing from the studio to the street. In the street the camera utilizes perspective in an outdoor location to compose the shot to emphasize the strength of friendship.

Nature defines the place of "wild life" in the L.A. streets in opposition to culture. In its hegemonic social construction, nature often becomes associated with people of color. They have traditionally been referred to lacking the "complexity" of Western European civilization. As a consequence of the faulty logic of this perception, they are considered more in time with the natural world. Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien refer to the strength of such historical influences that have affected the representation of black male sexuality:

"The repetition of these stereotypes in sexual representation betrays the circulation of "colonial fantasy" and traces the way the contours of his landscape have been shaped have been shaped by mainstream cultural legacies of slavery, empire and imperialism."<sup>[3]</sup>

Mercer and Julien refer to a British context, yet similar influences shape how Mexican Americans, especially in the southwestern lands taken from Mexico, have been represented by U.S. "Anglos." Issues of power, authority, domination, and exploitation litter this historical context. Further complications emerge in considering the mestizo heritage of Mexico. Mixed ancestry ties the contemporary Chicano to Native Americans, a group often referred to even today as noble savages. Consequently the boys in Goss' tape inherit a peculiar status in the eyes of dominant U.S. culture, one seen as more natural. In a sense the boys live an indigenous "wild life" of Hispanic L.A., natives of the streets in an urban jungle.

As Goss and the boys present a lifestyle which finds itself on the wrong side of the laws, taboos, and strictures of dominant Anglo culture, the tape reveals the neo-imperialist relation this culture establishes with these subjects. Their wildness encodes itself in opposition to this dominant culture. Can these two proponents of a subculture function within such a framework to create an identity that resists hegemonic control? They have the status of a triple "other." Yet they playfully recreate their natural habitat much as television documentaries recreate the scientifically deduced forms of actual wildlife.

All episodes that end in the street began in the studio as play. Goss sanctions and encourages a "natural" element of childhood. As seen in the staged and real arguments discussed above, play and actuality become blurred in the enactments, both in the natural settings and in the studio.

Also, the two boys use wild clothes to set themselves apart from their families. Censure at home keeps Carlos from dressing as he pleases, so he changes in the street in a semi-secluded doorway. Their voice-over narration underscores the implicit prohibition against this. In one instance, recalled by Cesar, a surveillance video camera had tracked Carlos changing his clothes in public. Dressing becomes a sexual act because of the possibility of surveillance and disapproval. As a gay teenager, Carlos finds himself relegated to the street to express his sexuality. This space becomes the natural space for a Latino youth who faces restrictions at home and at best indifference in public. It is in this place that the boys wander, cruising men, living and demonstrating their gay life. In a sense they "play" at being gay, "play" at breaking the rules. In so doing, they cast a subversive glance at the aesthetic ideas of reenactment, for it depends on recreated nature as a vehicle for expressing truth. The forms and rituals of their lives are clearly formed in culture. Their play with culture's rules shows their resistance to its demands.

Staging the reenactments requires improvisation. Carlos and Cesar are co-instigators along with Goss and are not simply instructed by Goss. The boys empower themselves in these video events, since they events register to a great degree the boy's desires to shape self-presentation. Their words shape the course of the project. Video technology does not simply record or frame them. The project crosses over into fiction and fantasy at their instigation. When they describe what they do and where they go, the video magically follows them there. Words become

visual reality. A park is described and suddenly, through editing, the boys appear there and the camera follows them. "Wild life" ensues. As in the bus stop scene, the argument sections, and the park setting, Carlos and Cesar direct the mise-en-scene. Their words become wishes that in turn become video reality. Hence the encoding of the practices that define their "wild life" achieves a new dimension that helps them fight against censure and indifference. Their fantasy identifies an ideal opposed to a disapproving hegemonic order. Cesar and Carlos have found co-conspirators in Goss and ultimately in any viewer who happens to come along.

The clothes changing incident also plays against surveillance. The surveillance video camera, which followed the boys before, is duplicated in the instrument Goss employs. In this later instance, not only is the artist attentive, but also the viewer's, Goss' and the boys' complicity in the creation of a cinematic spectacle is compounded by the act's transgressiveness. The boys are underage, and we are witnessing an actual even which has a potential consequence in social reality. Whereas nakedness might be simply a matter of convenience for the boy, we cannot ascertain this in the context of what's seen on the videotape or even in the ritual created around the event. The boy's showing of self has clear sexual connotations.

The breaking of a public and private morality is centered in this disputed wild style. And that wild style is a public issue not only in the boys' clothes themselves, but also in the process of changing into them. These two boys are aware of dominant culture's prohibitions. They transgress its codes to express themselves as oppositional and further as self-defined. They know the rules and the possibility of surveillance. Their self-presentation hinges on the sexuality expressed in the act.

Dick Hebdige's *Subcultures*[4] clarifies how performing such an act and recording it functions as defiance. The act responds to a hegemonic order in the subculture responds to a stricture that belies its presence. In this sense, identity emerges from contrary acts that separate and delineate a distinct subculture identity. The process of committing the act to videotape is commented on in this vein by themselves. They recognize the prurient interest that a society, which normally has no place for them, might betray in its prohibitions. Why forbid such behavior if it is of no interest? Contrary to this reading, one could also point out that indifference can be the gravest form of censorship. The sweets of L.A. can be safe for these boys since control over them is hegemonic, not total. Their various responses take into account power's vagaries.

A significant source the boys use to create an identity which is still not fully socially accepted are images of gay men (another subcultural product) and men as sexual objects which these two Chicanos find and keep. The images serve not only for eroticization but also as ideals. For gay men the possibility of seeing an image of a man as a sexual object exists simultaneously with the capability of identifying with another man. Numerous shades of distinction arise from the very nature of such images. Here the images reflect a white gay world, a world where not all are as comfortable in their identity as are these two boys. Problematic identification and objectification occurs across racial lines. Additionally, the messages of these images embody contradictions about seeing men as sexual objects. The boy's relation to the images they see and collect remains fraught with ambiguities.

For example, in one scene, a billboard advertising *The Advocate* shows a pair of

men, both white, one behind the other, hugging. A contrast is set up between the ideal gay couple and the one below, and this contrast reveals several striking issues around the possibility of representing gay relations. The two white persons are adult, whereas the boys must act more circumspectly. Their sexuality is strictly delimited because of their age and their ethnicity. This sense of limit surfaces in their discussion about of the suitability of "wild" clothes for Carlos. The billboard also embodies a visual ideal as opposed to the actual presence of Carlos and Cesar on the streets. The boys are subject to the hegemonic power which the state and society exercise there, including the recently increasing threat of gay bashing. To kiss or change quickly is quite different from standing in embrace, an act which considerably increases the possibility of censure.

The billboard is high, far above any casual disagreement. It also uses faceless bodies. Images which objectify male bodies because faces or other features are cropped off do not absolutely preclude identification. With a long tradition in gay subcultures, masks, disguises, and hidden identities have always been available as a gay response to the structures of dominant society. The billboard's image without a face recalls this history. By contrast, Carlos and Cesar present themselves openly cognizant of the position they occupy whether in the studio or the street. To themselves, to the video maker and to the audience, they are identified as gay. In terms of this billboard, they appear to remain indifferent to this visual ideal. Instead the viewer sees, through them, an alternative.

However, such commercial imagery does inform these two boys' images of themselves. As he explains the printed elements he has collected from his "wild life," Cesar betrays a great interest in just such imagery. In a studio interview, the framing shields all of Carlos but his torso, arms and his mouth, similar to *The Advocate* billboard. At a table, he reveals ads, invitations, receipts, and telephone numbers, all bits of their lifestyle. The framing employed here invites comparison between Carlos and the billboard. Like the models of *The Advocate* ad, he is in a studio free of immediate social reactions. In response, Cesar exposes documents and images that are important to his identity. They attest to his lifestyle because of their connection to his clothes, hair, gay friends and parties, as well as visual ideals. It is within images that Carlos finds a sexual and fashion message. In response to Goss' questioning, he reveals an interest in both the sexuality and the clothing depicted. From these images, emulation may proceed.

However, the tape establishes no clear connection outside of the actual possession and presentation of these images. Precisely how this material affects the "wild life" style remains obscure. Only the videomaker's choice of composition and Carlos' interest betray a causal link between visual ideals and self-image.

Cesar actively creates his image in another sequence. In partial darkness he covers his face with fluorescent paints. Out of darkness emerge both a clarification and an obfuscation of his visage. This is his own style. It simultaneously reveals and obscures. The video screen becomes the space where this occurs. Likewise, Carlos receives time in the tape to recite a poem that describes his view on love and friendship. These sequences echo the opening interviews in that the boys' identities are presented separately.

Here at the end, Goss does not intrude. There is no unifying composition to emphasize the boys' relationship. Rather, identity as an individual act is

foregrounded. From this a friendship can arise and with it a style, a "wild life". The artist's studio is a safe space, where Goss gives these two an opportunity to act out for a wider audience the minutiae of themselves. It is an imperfect process where possibility and actuality coexist.

Goss in his work has doubled the prurient interest dominant society might express in such activities. In the process he dissolves total indifference. His collaboration with these boys records and deepens the boys' identity as friends, as gay Latino teenagers. Making the videotape permits their identity to reveal its sources in the traditions of gay, Hispanic, and youth cultures. Ambiguity, playfulness, and a simple respect for their own nature permit Carlos and Cesar to transcend norms of representation. The boys emerge as themselves, resistant to the definition of the societies that touch them and finally resistant to the process of making art itself.

#### NOTES

1. See Ellis, Jack, *The Documentary Idea* (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), which points out the elements used in my comparison.
2. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Vol. I. An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1980), p. 85.
3. Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, 'True Confessions,' *Screen* 10:8

# Dorothy Arzner's trousers

by Jane Gaines

from *Jump Cut*, no. 37, July 1992, pp. 88-98

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1992, 2006

Who was Dorothy Arzner? The easy answer to the question is that Dorothy Arzner was the only woman director to survive in the U.S. motion picture industry during the studio system's Golden Era. Preceded in the silent era by this Weber and Alice Guy Blaché and followed in the 1950s by Ida Lupino, Arzner worked as the only woman director in this period, and she worked steadily as evidenced by her output — the twenty films released between 1927 and 1940. But the "who" question, although important for feminists, recedes in significance in comparison with the "what" question that matters so much. "What *was* she?" — an impossible determination, especially in relation to such an "impossible identity," a trouble of designation compounded further by time's passage and historical "change."<sup>[1]</sup> [\[open notes in new window\]](#) If the meaning of lesbian and gay identity stands in dispute in the present, it remains forever unresolvable both in and for the past. For feminist film theory, however, what Dorothy Arzner *was* and how to name it may be moot since feminist critics have already claimed her as *the* most important "lesbian" director in U.S. film history. The question then becomes as much one of what Dorothy Arzner *is* for feminist film theory in the contemporary period.

For the last fifteen years, feminists have made Dorothy Arzner into a kind of patron saint of theory, during which time her work has provided the subject matter for a number of important articles as well as a monograph published by the British Film Institute. Her position as an honorary deconstructionist becomes confirmed by her presence on the cover of one of the most difficult feminist film theory collections. [2] Yet something remains missing. With the exception of an important early talk by Claudia Gorbman, feminists whispered the word but never really spoke to Arzner's lesbianism.<sup>[3]</sup>

That is, feminists whispered the word until Judith Mayne's recent book broke the fifteen years of silence. Confirming the deepness of this silence, Mayne further asserts that throughout this hushed period, feminist film theory produced a strangely split discourse resulting in two "Dorthys": the "textual Arzner" and the highly visible image of Dorothy Arzner.<sup>[4]</sup> Quite rightly, Mayne points out the intent focus on the "textual Arzner," recalling the theoretical significance of the moment in *DANCE, GIRL, DANCE* (1940) when Judy (Maureen O'Hara) turns on her male audience, "returning the gaze." One cannot emphasize enough the importance of Claire Johnston's discovery of this on-screen reversal in the first decade of feminist film theory.<sup>[5]</sup>

Although *Cahiers du Cinéma*'s theorization of the "Series E film" demonstrated how gaps and formal disruptions occurred widely in classical Hollywood narratives, the possibility of totally undermining the patriarchal text seemed strategically wrong for feminist film theory, an emerging criticism that had already staked a great deal on establishing how patriarchal cinema functioned in an exclusionary way.<sup>[6]</sup> Looking back, one recalls how the discipline of early feminist film theory often worked as a constraint that produced more than a little frustration. And yet, following the late 1980s when, in the heyday of celebratory criticism, feminist critics suddenly read many Hollywood texts as progressive, it began to seem that *Cahiers* "Series E theory" and not classical film narrative itself that might be subverted from within. Today one is tempted to feel some nostalgia for the time when a critic rarely found such a moment as Johnston did in Arzner's DANCE, GIRL, DANCE. The theory of patriarchal cinema's thorough ideological saturation held at bay another potentially problematic tendency — the tendency to automatically ascribe transgressiveness to films and tapes when made by women.

Serious work on the "textual Arzner," whether it had to do with the discourse on monogamy or the suppression of the feminine in CHRISTOPHER STRONG (1932) helped to establish critical credentials for feminist film theory.<sup>[7]</sup> But Mayne tells us about two Arzners: the "textual Arzner," an always deflected representation of desire, and the photographic image of Dorothy Arzner, an image that hinted at the desire unrepresented in the film criticism. Mayne justly points out how prominent images of Dorothy Arzner wearing trousers and man-tailored suit jackets illustrated early scholarship, so that these images bore the burden of articulating the unspeakable. The significance of the photographs' silent but eloquent evidence cannot be emphasized enough, and not only as illustrations for scholarly discussions of Arzner's work. For years, an "8 by 10" glossy of Arzner with Joan Crawford on the set of THE BRIDE WORE RED (1937) hung on the wall of my office — a kind of feminist theory "pin-up."

I want to explore two avenues Mayne leaves open-first, to further her analysis of how Arzner's image functioned; second, to question the issue of Arzner and authorship by examining how this director worked with gay male costume designers. First, I want to reiterate Mayne's point about the image's incredible attractiveness. Arzner's image offers many delights — the expensive tailoring details on her suits, her patterned ties, cufflinks, white shirts, and jodhpurs worn with boots, one leg coolly crossed over the other. More than one production still features Dorothy in profile, sighting an actress, looking directly into the eyes of the other from under her thick unplucked brows. In these photographs, lesbian desire is made exceedingly alluring and chic.

That the chic butch Arzner (wielding the power of a male director and enjoying the adoration of glamorous actresses) represents only a fantasy of lesbianism doesn't matter. And to say that the image offers food for reverie is not to dismiss the political importance of the way Arzner's image has stood for lesbian desire in exactly the spot where that desire has been repressed. On the contrary, to say this is to acknowledge the tremendous imaginative power of lesbian reclamation, that real fantasy possession of the icons of motion pictures past.<sup>[8]</sup> It is also to acknowledge that if we wish to chart the coordinates of desire intersecting Arzner's image, we need to look at a variety of contradictory identity crossings. The image, after all, remains indifferent to the sort of fascination it attracts. Although persons

may have political positions in regard to fantasy material, fantasy itself doesn't much care what or who inspires it.[9]

Until very recently, the only way to locate the range of identity crossings to which I refer would have been along Adrienne Rich's "lesbian continuum," an ingenious gesture of inclusion that allowed a "maybe, maybe not" position on sexual love between women.[10] Since the 1980 appearance of Rich's essay developing this concept, it has stood as the reigning lesbian feminist paradigm in academic circles. But its influence has not gone without challenge. Many wonder if "lesbian continuum" can adequately express the complexity of identities formed around sexuality. And the concept has come under increasing attack for the way it has smoothed out the conflict between lesbianism involving sexuality and political (only) lesbianism.

At this time in history, academic feminism may look less and less toward the woman's movement (and its cultural feminism) and more toward the lesbian and gay movement as a source for an evolving theory of gender, identity, and sexuality. And I do mean "source," for as academic feminists have become more involved with university, politics and less involved with community struggles, they have looked to the people's movements to which they no longer belong for their "supply" of new concepts upon which to base theories. Most recently, lesbian and gay studies has given academic feminism a considerably feistier theorization of "lesbian," although it remains to be seen whether women's movement lesbians will see themselves at all in the category. What I am looking for in my attempt to comprehend the attractions to Arzner's image is a fluctuating category that acknowledges the uncertainty and the inadvisability of assigning identities based on sexual practice. Here I take my cue from Judith Butler's understanding of "lesbian" and "gay" as "sites of necessary trouble" whose categorical instability offers less an occasion for concern than an occasion for pleasure (a pleasure of duplicity as well as of uncertainty) (Butler, 14). The disputedness of the category should allow room for the cautious and tentative as well as the unequivocal embrace of lesbianism. I especially would like the "site of trouble" definition to allow (although the category may not finally extend this far) for a position of *vicarious transgression*.

*Vicarious transgression* refers to the kind of exhilaration produced by the knowledge of how much "trouble" gay/ lesbian desire produces for heterosexuality. It points to identification with the idea of disruption, although not necessarily participation in that disruption. This is a knowing position, as I have said, and what is known is that the dividing line between heterosexuality and homosexuality remains a disputable boundary, the two identities being so close that they can and do touch.[11] One would expect that the safe *transgressor* stands as nothing more than an interloper or a liberal romanticizer of the margins. This may be the case, but I am also wanting to borrow something from Alex Doty's concept of *queer positioning*, a vantage point on culture which one can step into and out of, a possibility that the text offers which a willing viewer can take up.[12] But *queer positioning* goes beyond its queasier cousin *vicarious transgression*. As I understand *queer positioning*, it is also a direct challenge to the textual subject positioning that in 1970s film theory was said to "produce" the viewer as (heterosexually) gendered. Here, instead, the viewer may be "produced" as a homosexual. Crucially, *queer positioning* implies that a proposition of some kind

has been made and accepted. I would want to retain some sense of this "trying out" of a sexual identity position. It's the *vicarious* aspect of an essentially transgressive fantasy.

My attempt to define this place of *vicarious transgression* is motivated by an interest in explaining the common situation of feminist critics who, although fascinated by her image, did not deal directly with Dorothy Arzner and lesbianism in the 1970s.[13] And I include in the category unequivocal lesbians, feminist not-lesbians, straight, in theory-only lesbians, as well as once only and future lesbians. I make no apologies for this attitude, which characterized so many feminists in the first fifteen years of Arzner scholarship. Undeniably, vicarious transgressors are fence-sitters.

While I am on the subject, I wish to emphasize that although Arzner's photographic image may invite a conventional auteur approach, that is not my interest Judith Mayne also dismisses auteurism for its contemporary naiveté, particularly given the significance of the poststructuralist critique of the author's position vis-a-vis the text (*Lesbian Looks*, 115). And the biographical approach has other problems, some of which can be illustrated by the influential interview with Arzner conducted by Karen Kay and Gerald Peary in 1973, six years before her death in 1979.[14] This interview, along with revivals of her work, helped restore Annear to her place in film history. At the time, DANCE, GIRL, DANCE (1940) CHRISTOPHER STRONG (1933), and THE WILD PARTY (1929) had played as centerpieces in the first of the First Annual Women's Film Festivals in Chicago, New York, and San Francisco.

The Kay and Peary interview does not significantly differ in its format from many other interviews with motion picture pioneers that have filled the pages of film journals. But although it is not constructed differently, feminist film critics have read it differently — more closely and over and over. This close close reading has been crucial to the process of writing a lesbian feminist film theory, although when the interview first appeared, it provoked only limited questions. The one question most often asked ("Was Dorothy Arzner at least a woman-identified woman?") actually allowed an evasion of the issue of lesbianism. In retrospect, the 1970 New York Radicalesbians formulation of a "woman-identified woman" seems somewhat quaint.[15] Over time, this strategic move to expand the definition of lesbian to include women who were lesbian in politics only seems to have fulfilled the prophecy about that very move. Yes, the concept worked to embrace Jane Addams, Willa Cather, and Dorothy Arzner. It also postponed dealing with the importance of lesbian sexuality, and it backed off from acknowledging the real dangers of living as an "out" homosexual. The "woman-identified woman" hypothesis also problematically set up a too literal expectation, which Arzner's own commentary on her work could not support. This expectation conspired with an unexamined auteurism to produce the "problem" of Dorothy Arzner. Much was made, for instance, of the fact that when questioned about CHRISTO PHER STRONG, (the Katherine Hepburn vehicle about the aviatrix based on the life of the British flyer Amy Lowell), Arzner said that she was more interested in the male character, Sir Christopher Strong. It is this character, a married man, by whom the heroine becomes pregnant. Honorably, to avoid the risk of dividing his family, she commits suicide in a successful shot at breaking the altitude record.

In the interview, Arzner denies that she had any particular interest in either of the

important woman characters (Billie Burke's wife and Hepburn's daring flyer):

"...I was more interested in Christopher Strong, played by Cohn Clive, than in any of the women characters. He was a man 'on the cross.' He loved his wife, and he fell in love with the aviatrix. He was on the rack. I was really more sympathetic with him, but no one seemed to pick up on that. Of course, not too many women are sympathetic about the torture the situation might give to a man of upright character." (Kay and Peary, 163).

One can read this remark in any number of interesting ways, the most important of which may be to repudiate the kind of automatic auteurism Arzner's work could attract. Also, from a contemporary point of view, we have arrived at the point in Left politics where we know that transgression in one arena doesn't necessarily mean transgression in another[16]. Or, as Diana Fuss asks the question, "And does inhabiting the outside...guarantee radicality?" (Fuss, 5).

Clearly, the burden of reading Dorothy Arzner's work in a radical way lies with us and not with the historical person. What this means is that as critics we can (and do) read this group of films "in the name of Dorothy Arzner." By reading "in the name of," I mean something slightly different from the kind of inscription implied in Judith Mayne's term "female signature." (*Women at the Keyhole*, 115). I do want to retain some notion of the female author as having left something in the text (for political purposes at least), yet locating that something always requires an act of faith that is politically problematic in other ways.[17] So, by reading "in the name of," or reading "for Arzner," I mean more of a production of critical meaning as an homage to Dorothy Arzner and all that she has come to stand for in film history. And I would extend the same gesture to those designers whose work needs credit and admiration.

Lesbian and gay theories of aesthetics (whether of high art or low camp) have historically started with the paradigm of the discrepancy of homosexuals' lived relation to heterosexual society. In the classic theorizations of camp, for instance, gay sensibility is derived from the need to constantly assemble and disassemble — to perform a self. Richard Dyer has recently given this theorization a new angle in his argument that, in one sense, being gay functions significantly like authorship — both are performances. ("All authorship and all sexual identities are performances, done with greater or less facility.")[18] Some are successful; some are not Dyer achieves the simultaneous retrieval and dismissal of authorship with a coy twist — to believe in authorship is to believe in fairies. Retaining the social construction of both, while entertaining the belief for the course of one fleeting article, he subtly shows us the political significance of believing (all the while we know they aren't really real but "only" made up). And so I only too happily find an argument I can borrow that allows me to pretend Arzner is an author without the danger of lapsing into auteur theory's politically retrograde idealism.

What would a reading "for Arzner" look like? First of all, I'm not arguing that for different readings, because my dissatisfaction is not with feminist readings of female auteurs but rather with the stubborn intrusion of causality whenever one sets up any kind of author/text relation. A reading of CHRISTOPHER STRONG "for Arzner," might first of all look at the film in the interests of transgression, considering, for instance, the way the characters undermine conventional morality.

CHRISTOPHER STRONG then gives us a situation in which the most upstanding of patriarchs admits the contradiction which conventional marriage usually cannot accommodate: It is possible to love two people (or more) at the same time.

The CHRISTOPHER STRONG family plight seemingly remains played out within the generic laws of melodrama. But what do we make of the fact that the film finally refuses to bear out the moral pattern of the times (always the test of melodrama)?[19] No one is judged, no lessons are taught, no character is taken to task. The sacrifice of the heroine avoids a soppy, artificial, restoration of the moral order. Because Cynthia Darrington removes herself from the world she never becomes conservative like Christopher Strong, who is given the line: "Marriage and children make almost any woman old-fashioned and intolerant."

The importance of locating the Arzner text in relation to melodrama will not be lost on film theorists, but they will want to know how a reading "for Arzner" might be different from the many analyses of 50s melodrama in terms of director Douglas Sirkian aesthetics. Traditionally, Sirkian auteur criticism has read the director's films as using an excessive cinematic style to "comment" on the narrative, a device which illustrates the moral demise of the U.S. middle class family.[20] A somewhat similar critical position has been attributed to lesbian and gay existence (not to mention cultural production). What defines lesbian and gay identities (if anything does), according to Judith Butler, is how people live them as "running commentaries" on the heterosexual claim to naturalness. As such, they work parodically off the heterosexual assumption (Butler, 23).

What we would finally want to argue "for Arzner," however, must go beyond what critics have considered subversive in a Sirkian sense, that is, "for" an immigrant German Leftist point of view on the United States in the 1950s. Whereas a Sirkian point of view may start from a "displacement" in terms of bourgeois United States, Arzner's vantage offers a "displacement" in relation to heterosexual society, producing a more troublesome and inexcusable disjunction.[21] From this peculiar (queerly positioned) point of view, we can interpret CHRISTOPHER STRONG as demonstrating how heterosexual monogamy cripples the imagination and curbs the appetite for living and thus how Cynthia's heroic death stands at once for a bold termination of pregnancy and an acknowledgement that heterosexuality kills.[22]

## ARZNER AND HER COSTUME DESIGNERS

While I see the advantages of considering the film text as the director's performance (especially the lesbian or gay author), the notion has as much or more usefulness when applied to the motion picture costume designer. Significantly, a performance theory of cultural production also allows us to consider collective work, which is the real mode of U.S. motion picture industry production in this period (as opposed to single authorship, the imaginary mode). So I want to look at the performances of Arzner and her designers, working toward a performance theory of collaboration.

One point needs clearing up, however, before I proceed any further with what could be seen as a conflict of discourse: the use of a gay male aesthetic based on camp within a lesbian-directed film. Although it is well established that the gay male relation to camp has a long history, descending from the tradition of the dandy, camp does not clearly have a positive relation to lesbianism. It may be that

a lesbian relation to camp is emergent in academic circles, especially following Judith Butler's work which takes drag as one of its central paradigms. A second look may discover camp there all along, certainly evidenced in the lesbian community's enthusiastic reception of Jan Oxenberg's COMEDY N SIX UNNATURAL ACTS.[23] Probably the best move here (in the interests of encouraging the development of a lesbian theory of camp) is to make a distinction between the bad politics and the good politics of camp. In the first instance, the problem with camp is its refusal to renounce the straight culture on which it has developed a parasitical dependence (Ross, 161). Camp relishes heterosexual romance with its out-dated chivalry as well as consumer culture acquisition with all of its class aspirations. But also, gay male camp is based upon the acquisition of traditional "feminine" tendencies — "emotion," "fussiness," and "narcissism," tendencies that lesbians have abandoned and discarded. Yet herein lie the possibilities of good camp. Camp knows without question how "femininity" and "masculinity" can be detached from gender, so that one gender's abandoned "traits" can become the other gender's "found" qualities. The knowledge of the constructedness of gender thus constitutes the good politics of camp.

One could justify discussing Arzner in terms of costume because her first film at Paramount in 1927 was FASHIONS FOR WOMEN; descriptions of this lost film suggest that she may have undermined the fashion-show-within-the-film subgenre with a commentary on women displayed. The film, starring Esther Ralston as the competitive Lola, features a scene in which one model locks a rival in a close[24] I'm also taking my lead from the Kay and Peary interview where Arzner mentions her work with both stars and particular designers, although she provides only selective recollections of these years.

For instance, Arzner nostalgically remembers Dietrich but never mentions Ginger Rogers; she worked with Dietrich's designer Travis Banton at Paramount on THE WILD PARTY, but only recalls that Adrian and Howard Greer designed the costumes. Of all of the thirteen films Arzner directed, only the two she directed with Joan Crawford were designed by MGM's ace designer Gilbert Adrian. Greer, who later designed for Jane Russell, actually co-designed CHRISTOPHER STRONG with Walter Plunkett of GONE WITH THE WIND fame. So I'm using the fact that Dorothy remembers these designers above all the others to justify my interest in singling out two spectacular costume moments for discussion — Adrian's bugle-beaded red dress in THE BRIDE WORE RED (one of the triumphs of his fourteen-year career at MGM) and the Greer-Plunkett moth costume Hepburn wears in CHRISTOPHER STRONG.

Among scholars who work on motion picture fashion, information about the lesbian/ gay identities of the studio costume designers is important history. For some years, the references to these mythic figures' homosexuality have stayed at the level of in-joke and innuendo. There has never really been any effort to discuss gay Hollywood in terms of the designers who created the stars. Although Vito Russo mentions the lesbian relationship between actress Ali Nazimova and Natasha Rambova (Rudolph Valentino's wife), he makes no real connection between Rambova's lesbianism and her designing.[25] Rambova not only served as producer on a film version of Oscar Wilde's play *Salome*, but designed set and costumes for films starring both lover Nazimova and husband Valentino. (CAMILLE, 1921; SALOME, 1922; MONSIEUR BEUCAIRE, 1924). The Nazimova-

Valentino-Rambova triangle is also the most available of the myths, so available that it could be mainstreamed in Ken Russell's VALENTINO (1977). I am more interested, then, in the submerged and transient history of motion picture costume design. One can't deny the advantage of the transience of such history to the gay community since in this more fluid state, stories can be embellished, deepened, tampered with, and, if necessary, they can disappear without a trace. As the writers of the JUMP CUT Special Section on Lesbians and Film have put it, "Gossip provides the official unrecorded history of lesbian participation in film."<sup>[26]</sup>

And in lesbian and gay reclamation of the past, traditional historical "fact" is stood on its head since the most unverifiable rumor may serve as the foundation of a community history within which information is widely shared and jealously guarded. Such information becomes passed on as "truth." The manner of savoring the detail while passing it on (with flagrant disinterest in conventional evidence) constitutes its truth claim. Such is the case with Gilbert Adrian's "marriage" to actress Janet Gaynor. A close reading of the fan magazines in the 1940s suggests a different kind of coding — confirmation of the rumor by reverse emphasis — that is, gushing and cooing about the wardrobes Adrian designed for his wife, who in recent years toward the end of her life was linked romantically with Mary Martin.

How, then, do we move from "confirmed rumor" to screen aesthetics? We move with great difficulty because of the popular practice of looking at the films of lesbian and gay directors "that way." Therefore, what I want to undercut in this exercise is the kind of direct correlation of the artistic "performer's" life with an aesthetic effect. Let me raise at least two objections to this tendency. First, as Richard Dyer explains it, it is again the persistent "belief" in authors that produces a "readiness to credit a shot in a film to the director's sexual life..." (Dyer, 187). Second, "belief" in authors always cancels out belief in audiences. In other words, crediting a gay sensibility behind the scenes often means that we forget that this sensibility lies as much in a gay audience's appetite (somewhere, sometime).

In the last five years, lesbian and gay studies has made a significant contribution toward a more satisfactory account of the relation between subcultural production and the host culture. And I look to this work for an approach to homosexuality and motion picture costume design that goes beyond an idea of authorial volition yet still allows for a concept of stylistic signature, so that an analysis of the design performance can be undertaken "in the name" of the designer. Problematically, if aesthetic forms are overdetermined, subcultural aesthetic forms are extra-overdetermined, so that one has to consider local in-group codes, urban life, the history of taste, social class, gender construction, sexual practices, as well as the construction of the unconscious.

In the new lesbian and gay critical work, the relation between gender and clothing stands as a foundational principle. This gives us a starting place for a more comprehensive theory of lesbian and gay costume design; that is, this thing would start from the complete fabrication of gender. As Judith Butler has laid out the critical project for lesbian and gay studies, it is an "engagement" with gender as a performed fabrication and a commitment to fabricate it all over again in new terms, subversive terms that can reveal the way the notion of "true" gender is "nothing other than the effects of *drag*." The "sex" part of gender needs to be put into a "site of insistent political play," Butler concludes. (Butler, 129) Although we

can see sex and gender "put into play" in theatrical costume design (taking the two apart and putting them back together in unpredictable ways on the body), we may not necessarily see the political aspect activated at all. Some of this is the apolitical legacy of drag.

Gay motion picture costume design is an exercise based on the premise of *drag*. Here I mean drag as dressing up, as the way in which one "wears" one's gender, and I take this from Esther Newton's anthropological definition of drag as both *distance* and *costume*.[27] If *drag* is the distanced, artificial gender "put on," *camp* is the relationship between homosexuality and everything else (Newton, 185). And since drag is ever and always a relation, it has an internal resistance to location and definition, encouraged, of course, by the way camp is produced in the claiming as much as or more than it is produced in the making.

Perhaps the most functional breakdown for our purposes resides in Newton's finding in camp three intersecting themes: incongruity, theatricality, and humor (although the third theme is not sufficiently fleshed out enough to be useful). As Newton says about the perception and creation of incongruity, it is based on the "moral deviation" that defines the homosexual experience. And one of her informants comes very close to isolating camp's core structure:

"Camp is all based on homosexual thought. It is all based on the idea of two men or two women in bed. It's incongruous and it's funny."  
(Newton, 107)

But how, to ask again, does one get from two men or two women in bed to an elaborated stylistic code? The theatrical property of camp gives us the execution, the performance of style, and the "play" of sex and gender where the pairing that is thought to be matched can be made to seem incongruous. The exaggerated wrongness of two men and two women (in bed) becomes the paradigm of lesbian and gay culture rewoven into all other aspects of culture — an iteration of discrepancy everywhere and anywhere. And this discrepancy confounds straight culture — what straight culture sees as a dangerous mismatch (two similarly gendered bodies) is really a match (two similarly gendered bodies).

I see the virtuoso gay costume designers as performing gender themes with the female stars as their material, elaborating these themes in such a way that each actress could be seen as "wearing" gender somewhat differently from the next, with the variation supplied by the part she played. Within the realist aesthetic of the classical motion picture, these designers worked with the tension between clothes and costume, as this dichotomy mirrored another dichotomy, that between natural and unnatural. So, whenever they could, they worked in a vein that thwarted the tendency of costume to become naturalized as clothes and the tendency of gender to become naturalized as a sexualized body. On the day to day level, gay designers expressed this as a disdain for realism, even a deep irreverence toward the classical realist aesthetic. As the natural always threatened to erupt into the unnatural and artificial, the ordinary always remained in danger of becoming the spectacular, hence the often-heard complaint that Hollywood costume in this period looked ridiculous. Because of the constraints of realist costuming, the virtuoso designers performed their strongest design statements in the medium of the costumed costume — the dress for the formal evening and especially the costume ball.

## SPEAKING IN SARTORIAL TONGUES

The two costumes I want to analyze are such costumed costumes — dresses that one would never wear in conventional society. To do so would mean to risk speaking the language of the unnatural (as opposed to the language of the naturalized), that is, to speak "deviance" in public. Much of this rhetoric of deviation becomes performed on the female body through the imaginative use of textures, not surprisingly one of the favorite vehicles of camp expression.[28] There is something especially delicious about the way these two costumes use clinging fabrics to outline the female body, to literalize the metaphor "dripping with sensuality," celebrating the wetness, the "juice" of female sexuality.[29] But the costumes also make the body dangerous — too blinding to look at, too hot to lick, too slippery to grip. Certainly this is costuming subtexting or speaking in sartorial tongues at its best. Costume, of course, provides the only text which is fabric in two senses of the word — it provides both a meaning in cloth and a clothing in material. And let us not take for granted the actual signifying material out of which these costumes were painstakingly constructed. Gay costume historian David Chierichetti tells us that the glint of Crawford's scandalous red dress came from two million hand-sewn bugle-beads.[30] Hepburn's moth costume which encases her body from toe to head, (echoing her goggles and aviator's cap), is of gold lame with a diaphanous chiffon wing-like cape.

What, then, does this other "tongue" tell us about desire in the scene from *CHRISTOPHER STRONG*? How does it tell us another (different) narrative from the one about the virginal aviatrix (Lady Cynthia Darrington) entertaining the British politician Sir Christopher Strong who has come to her apartment on the pretext of asking her opinion about his daughter Monica's affair with a married man? Later, the affair between Lady Cynthia and Sir Christopher is consummated in New York, after she has completed a transworld flight and been given a tickertape welcoming parade in the city. Arzner "performs" the editing of the scene that represents their sexual intercourse by cutting to a close up of Cynthia's hand on the bedside table, with voice over interchange between the two.

Significantly, the moth costume is designed for a character who (rather like the androgynous Garbo) hates clothes. Cynthia is a "tomboy," most comfortable wearing jodhpurs so she can swing one leg over a chair and sit with her legs wide apart. An hour before she must leave for a costume ball, she works at her drafting table, and the maid has to remind her to dress. This means that Cynthia is putting on this moth suit while talking to Sir Christopher, a scene which utilizes one of the sexually evocative possibilities of off-screen space, hiding the space of dressing and undressing in order to stage dress/undress for the character as well as the viewer. So Cynthia strips to her essence for the viewer as well as for Sir Christopher who can't recognize or classify her species. "Do you know what I am?" she asks. "Something exquisite, a moth perhaps..." he answers.

The strangeness of the scene, certainly, has to do with the fact that a human man appears to be making love to a large gender-nonspecific bug, maybe an extraterrestrial. She/it has to ask him, "You're not making love to me, are you?" because she doesn't know what human beings actually do. (A virgin might as well be from outer space in this regard.][31] Beverle Houston has written that the costume marks Cynthia's transition to "body *not* career as a new site of identity."

[32] As Cynthia asks, "Do you know what I am?" she is not sure what it means to inhabit a female body. What is she supposed to do with such a body? This new female encasement displays her curves and grips her thighs, keeping her knees locked together so that she must shuffle and glide instead of stride. This might be her metamorphosis into femalehood (heterosexual womanhood), the condition in which women experience everything through their bodies. So Cynthia must now wear her female body as a shimmering, trembling casing-disjunctively, perhaps, because the brusque, no-nonsense voice coming out of the body is still the uninflected tomboy voice. In this female encasing, Cynthia learns to avert her eyes — to deny her attractiveness (her powers to lure) — while practicing how to use this power.

But I don't know why no one has yet suggested the lesbian interpretation of this scene ("for Arzner") in which the patriarch stands between the women in the film — Cynthia, Lady Strong (Billie Burke) and his daughter Monica (Helen Chandler), as I have suggested. She then represents the taboo lesbian body — to him she might as well be a moth — perhaps a lesbian vampire moth.[33] Is this why the metaphors are so strangely mixed? (The wire antennae from her close-fitting cap frames Sir Christopher's face in close up with a question mark.) But who is the moth, Cynthia or Sir Christopher? After all, it is he who faces danger here by getting too close to the flame, and the match strangely prefigures the burst of flames that end the film as her plane dives to earth.

There is yet another way I like to consider both this example of costuming and the one in *THE BRIDE WORE RED*. These costumes have a visual excessiveness that transgresses the basic requirements of cinematic storytelling. As I have written elsewhere, the directorial code in the industry called for the subservience of costume to narrative. Costume was not supposed to call attention to itself (although I don't know how something subdued could also function to inspire envy and awe and to give rise to fantasies about the stars. )[34] What has long attracted me to Adrian's work is his refusal to rein in his designing when the script called for it. (Catty and jealous critics said that his costumes were too "up" for the emotionally "up" scenes.) Even gay director George Cukor has been quoted as saying that if a costume "knocked your eye out," it wasn't good for the scene or the film as a whole (Gaines, 193). Cukor may only have spoken about the directorial rule of thumb, but fortunately he broke his own code in the numerous MGM films on which he worked with Adrian: *ROMEO AND JULIET* (1936), *THE WOMEN* (1939), *CAMILLE* (1936), *PHILADELPHIA STORY* (1940) as well as *TWO-FACED WOMAN* (1940), to name a few. By breaking the codes of classical narrative, by refusing to make the spectacular costume subservient to the narrative, Adrian gives us designs that visually climax to meet by degree the emotional heights of the developing drama. In other words, the narrative and the costume discourses orgasmically "come" at the same time. Certainly Plunkett and Cheer also achieve this with the moth costume in *CHRISTOPHER STRONG*, but the "red dress" scene in *THE BRIDE WORE RED* gives us not only a higher degree of visual satiation but also a more complex narrative problem.

I want to frame my discussion of *THE BRIDE WORE RED* with the story of how Dorothy Arzner met Joan Crawford. Arzner was given the job of directing Crawford in the half-finished *THE LAST OF MRS. CHEYNEY* at MGM because Franchot Tone (Crawford's husband at the time), urged that she consider Arzner after the

picture's director died suddenly. Tone suggested that she go to see Arzner's *CRAIG'S WIFE*, released in February, 1937. Alexander Walker's account of their first meeting, while not a first hand one, still gives us a way of imagining this meeting:

"She and Crawford took to each other at once. Arzner was four or five years older than her star, but she looked like a youth in her mid-twenties and could be mistaken for a boy. She was invariably impeccably turned out, usually in twill trousers or tweeds tailored with a chic yet masculine line. She affected a slouchy hat on the set. Yet the effect, instead of being "butch," was the crisp statement by a talented and shrewd woman of the qualities she wore comfortably in the Hollywood studios where she freelanced." [35]

The question is, did Tone (after several years of marriage), see Crawford in this role or did she see herself (since later she wanted to do the role when it was remade as *HARRIET CRAIG* (1950) for Columbia, directed there by Vincent Sherman (with whom she was rumored to have been having an affair at the time). *THE LAST OF MRS. CHEYNEY* was not a success, but the working relation between Arzner and Crawford was, and some of its themes were carried over into *THE BRIDE WORE RED*. In the earlier film, Crawford is a jewel thief who thinks of herself as a "respectable adventuress" and believes that she is superior to her wealthy victims. As in *THE BRIDE WORE RED*, Crawford exposes elite society, but in the earlier film this is more indirectly achieved by the device of compromising love letters written by a British Lord to the adventuress. In putting Crawford's sense of superiority into the service of social critique, Arzner is quite original. Certainly Arzner makes productive use of Crawford's conviction that she *was* better than others, a resource that other directors didn't always tap.

*THE BRIDE WORE RED*, rewritten from the play *THE GIRL FROM TRIESTE*, originally was to have starred Luise Rainer as the Trieste prostitute whom a philosophical aristocrat discovers and tries to use to conduct a limited social experiment — attempting to pass off someone from the lowest order as a lady — in order to prove that only luck and fate determine social position. He gives her money for a fantastic wardrobe and sets her up for a few weeks in an elite Swiss Alps resort. Anni Pavlovich, half Polish, thus becomes the refined and polished Senora Anne Vivaldi. At the resort she meets a young monied aristocrat Rudi Pal (Robert Young) vacationing with his fiancée Maddelena (Lynne Carver) as well as two chaperones, an admiral (Reginald Owen) and a contessa (Billie Burke). By the end of her stay Crawford/Anni has succeeded in getting Ruth to propose to her and to break his engagement to the generous and forgiving Maddelena. Although Crawford/Anni prefers the hotel postman Giulio (Fanchot Tone), a peasant, she decides to elope with the aristocrat to seize the fantasy of the yacht in the harbor, the butler and chauffeur. But she faces a race against time to marry the aristocrat before a telegram to the contessa will arrive announcing that Crawford/Anni is a fake.

*THE BRIDE WORE RED* is one of a few films from the Golden Era of motion picture costume (1927 to 1940, roughly the period of Adrian's tenure at MGM), where the big dress and its scene become more than the sum of the narrative. The dress gives the Crawford character away and she knows it, but she insists on wearing it down to her engagement dinner. The scene in her hotel dressing room

with her old "barmaid" friend from Trieste (now a maid in the mountain hotel), marks a private space of female friendship and class solidarity in opposition to the class distinctions of the public hotel lobby downstairs. When her friend the maid says that she's like a fire in it, Anni responds that she knows that "it's too red and too loud and too cheap." But the dress becomes the character's means of revenge as she sits at the dinner table, glittering and seething, egging the admiral on to tell stories about how he remembers bouncing her on his knee as a child (but probably as a prostitute.)

If CHRISTOPHER STRONG is about rejecting the heterosexual contract because of the miserable dependency upon men that produces women as conservative, THE BRIDE WORE RED is about the equation of marriage and prostitution, and in its sophistication the film echoes Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* and Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.<sup>[36]</sup> The harlot dress which is supposed to condemn the wearer on the basis of "taste" (read: class) is a kind of magical dress which betrays not the moral degeneracy of Anni (and the peasants with whom she is aligned) but the class insularity (and moral illiteracy) of the Italian aristocracy. For Anni, marriage to Rudi Pal would be prostitution — she's only doing it for the money — and the dress stands in for the real whore she would become. Returning to her room after the exposure scene, the dress she sees in the mirror no longer seems beautiful to her at all.

What happens in the dining room scene? I want to read this scene "for" Arzner and Adrian as one of those moments that Cukor and other directors feared — a moment when the scene erupts into the spectacular. Seeing this depends on an analytical separation of character from star image as well as from a "real person" actress-all artificial selves.<sup>[37]</sup> Each component has its separate critique — Anni the prostitute performs a criticism of the admiral, the contessa, and Rudi Pal, each in turn. (Leaving the thoroughly blameless woman — Maddelena — a favorite Arzner construction.) But simultaneously the actress splits off from the star image "Joan Crawford" and performs an impersonation of herself. What is produced is not a moment of "rightness," or what Richard Dyer calls the "perfect fit" between actor and role.<sup>[38]</sup> What is produced is perfect redundancy.

But Crawford's charged body, doubly electric because of her performance of herself, has the effect on the scene of a kind of force field around which other relations become mysteriously rearranged. Because "prostitute" gets displaced onto "peasant" ("sex" displaced onto "class"), Anni's sensitivity about references to peasants during the dinner remains ambiguous. Does the character disassociate herself from the peasants because she wants to reject her former life of sin or because she exhibits no class solidarity? The danger of the eruption of spectacle is finally that the answer to this question does not matter. Nothing matters except the "play" of the high camp icon, confirming, as we already know, that camp is ultimately apolitical.

Where in this scene do we find Dorothy Arzner, the former editor and craftsperson? Crawford has three important reaction shots. The first is a reaction to the sound of the flute played by the peasant/mailman (Tone/Gilio); the second a reaction to the shot of Giulio delivering the fatal telegram which he knows carries the news of her ruse; the third a reaction to the shot of the contessa reading the telegram. We need to consider the unusual number of these close ups within the

same sequence and their duration on the screen in relation to Crawford's screen acting capabilities. One explanation for the unusual number might be found in Barry King's close analysis of Crawford in MILDRED PIERCE in which he finds that the camera exhibits a pattern of consistently cutting away from Crawford in close up to adjacent objects or other characters. In his view, this practice helped to compensate for the narrowness of her expressive range.[39] To put it another way, resourceful directors learned to make the objects around the actress bristle with emotion and to let other actors pick up the affective slack. Working in league with the editing pattern, Adrian's characteristic above-the-table detailing creates a glittering focal fascination, directing the eye to the brooch that clasps the ends of the bugle-beaded red cape draped over Crawford's shoulders. Collaborating in a difficult exercise in cinema aesthetics, Adrian and Arzner produce an entire body that "catches light" The costume here functions as an eloquent object standing in for the facial and bodily articulation that was not forthcoming from the actress.

The effectiveness of Adrian's conceptions is measured in the success of the illusion that Crawford's characters changed from one film to another in the twenty-four motion pictures for which he designed her costumes. At the same time he differentiated the character, he defined the star image, and in THE BRIDE WORE RED, his fifteenth film with Crawford, Adrian was getting increasingly adept at synthesizing her persona (although the huge-shouldered silhouette wouldn't appear until after 1940). Here, he uses a solid color to help define simultaneously the firebrand sexual volatility of the character and the bloody severity of the Crawford image that surfaced in the book *Mommy Dearest*. The drama of the red dress appears at a point in the development of the Crawford image where her severe self-punishing perfectionistic persona was beginning to overwhelm and take over the characters she played. Joan was never subtle or soft, but always clear, sharp, and driving. Her persona was dedicated to the principle of getting what you want by making a virtue out of saying that you want it. It was only a matter of a few years before there was nothing left to do with the Crawford persona but push it into self-parody as seen in SUSAN AND GOD (1940), MILDRED PIERCE (1945) and HARRIET CRAIG (1950).

But what Crawford lost in critical acclaim for her performances after MILDRED PIERCE she has continued to win back in camp following. What is campy about Joan, however, is not what is campy about Judy Garland (who wears her pathos on her sleeve and always seems to have a lump in her throat).[40] What is campy about Joan is that she drives such hard emotional bargains and displays such ferocity in pursuit of hearth and home. Not only does she raises bourgeois aspirations to such a pinnacle of disaster, but she wrecks this havoc wearing suits, evening gowns, coats, hats, and "frocks" by Adrian. With Crawford, one can almost reach out and break off the jagged glass edges. The spectacle of this wreckage (in the face of Joan's conviction of her propriety) becomes not horrible but absolutely wonderful.

If each of the major stars from this period "wore" gender in a different way, Joan Crawford's distinctive style can be seen as a "modeling of femininity," that is, existence as a rack upon which to hang the accessories of femininity, telling us that femininity means nothing but its accessories and assuring us that femininity can be taken off by lesbians and put on by gay men. The fact that one of Crawford's definitive roles was in a film called MANNEQUIN (1938) and that she was known

as a "clothes horse" help confirm this sense of her as only the model of femininity and not the "real" thing. But the profundity of this star construction does not get lost on the lesbian/gay sensibility since it is thorough her artificiality that Joan's persona tells the "truth" about heterosexuality — that, in Judith Butler's words, heterosexuality is "an impossible imitation of itself." (Butler, 23). For propriety's sake (an absurd rationale at this point) the Crawford image insists on a kind of "truth in artifice," the moral high ground swamped with decadence. Hers is not a peroxide artificiality, covering up its roots. The two million bugle beads testify that her "effect" has been laboriously produced. Drag is an artificial gendering, and artificial gender is always drag.

#### EPILOGUE: A FANTASY HISTORY

Looking again at my photograph of Arzner and Crawford on the set of THE BRIDE WORE RED, an echo of another image reproduced in *The Celluloid Closet*, I wonder if there is something we might have missed about the friendship between these two women? (Russo, 50). How far did their mutual admiration go? What were the limits of their passionate friendship? After all, Dorothy was the perfect consort for Joan — the only person good enough for her, a fact she must have realized after she had discarded so many husbands (Doug Fairbanks, Phil Terry, in addition to Franchot Tone), each of whom was let go no differently than hired help who couldn't learn the job.

Dorothy, however, always satisfied Joan. A commensurate perfectionist, professional and powerful in the film world, Dorothy lent Joan her capable shoulders and Dorothy never let her down — exceeding Joan's impossible expectations where others so often failed. Joan entrusted her friend with the coveted job of directing Pepsi-Cola commercials when she became an executive in the corporation she took over from her husband — an early first case of women's networking in the television industry.

And Dorothy was tidy enough for Joan's tastes. Women, as we know, have their organs neatly tucked inside them whereas men's organs crudely hang out — all raw and uncooked. On occasion, Joan liked raw meat, but only because it was fashionable and supposedly heathful. Unfortunately for daughter Christine, the mother insisted that Christine should also like it despite the child's understandable distaste. Joan really preferred soft gardenia petals but never admitted it openly. She was sympathetic about closetiness, however. She knew that only clothes belonged in closets, and she was sensitive about the dangers of wire hangers which left deep "hanger-marks" on body and psyche. Joan was protective of Dorothy because within the industry her friend was not out as a lesbian and furthermore not out as a woman.

I want to suggest that because the two women admired each other so thoroughly, they began to mirror each other. As Arzner made Crawford, Crawford made Arzner. Joan emulated Dorothy in the mannish look she adored. She practiced striding and learned Dorothy's gestures through shrewd observation. This was a gradual transformation. Adrian suggested that Joan work on her shoulders and she found ways of slimming her hips to approximate Dorothy's boyish figure.

Or was it the other way around — that Dorothy stepped into Joan's body? That Mildred Pierce has Dorothy's smartness, classiness, and drive (not to mention

business acumen) was no accident. Was it Dorothy, then, who won the Academy Award for acting in 1945 — the only Crawford award? After which Dorothy stepped out of Joan's body because her job was done. She had finally perfected her favorite star — turning the goddess into a real woman with chocolate cake instead of rhinestones for a hen

So I ask you, was Dorothy Joan — or was Joan Dorothy?

[Notes on page 2](#)

---

[To top](#)    [Current issue](#)    [Archived essays](#)    [Jump Cut home](#)

### Dorothy Arzner's trousers

Page 2

#### NOTES

1. Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 14-16.
2. Constance Penley, *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988).
3. Claudia Gorbman. "Trance Girls Trance: Seeing and Reading Dorothy Arzner," paper delivered at Duke University, October, 1985. The first significant reference to the silence about Arzner and the representation of lesbians in feminist film theory is Sara Halprin, "Writing on the Margins." (Review of E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*), JUMP CUT no. 29 (1984).
4. Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), chapter 5. The idea of "two Dorothys" is emphasized more strongly in another version of this chapter published as "Lesbian Looks: Dorothy Arzner and Female Authorship," in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, eds. Bad Object-Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 106-107. In October, 1990, I delivered an earlier version of this paper at a Symposium sponsored by the Pittsburgh International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival and the Film Studies Program at the University of Pittsburgh, not knowing until later that I was "pinch hitting" for Judith Mayne. My rewriting has been considerably influenced by her significant work, particularly on this point
5. See Claire Johnston, ed. *The Work of Dorothy Arzner: Towards a Feminist Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1975), but I refer to the short passage in Johnston's more available essay "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," in *Notes on Women's Cinema* (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1973). 29; repr. *Sexual Stratagems*, ed. Patricia Erens (New York Horizon, 1979; *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976).
6. See Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni, "Cinema/Ideology/ Criticism," *Screen* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1971), pp. 27-36 on the category "e" film; Barbara Klinger, "'Cinema/Ideology/Criticism' Revisited: The Progressive Text," *Screen* 25, no. 1 (January-February 1984), 30-44, is a good critique of this important article; repr. in somewhat different form in *Film Genre Reader*. Ed. Barry Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).
7. See Jacquelyn Suter, "Feminine Discourse in CHRISTOPHER STRONG."

*Camera Obscura*, no. 3-4 (Summer 1979), 135-50.

8. See, for instance, Claire Whitaker, "Hollywood Transformed. Interviews with Lesbian Viewers," *Jump Cut Hollywood, Politics, and Counter-Cinema*, ed. Peter Steven (New York: Praeger, 1985).
9. See my "Competing Glances: Reading Robert Mapplethorpe's *Black Book*," *New Formations*, no. 16 (April 1992).
10. Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1986), 51.
11. Diana Fuss, "Inside/Out," in *Inside/Out*, 3-4.
12. Alex Doty, "Lesbian and Gay Cultures Meet Auteurism," paper given at University of Pittsburgh Film Studies Symposium on George Cukor and Dorothy Arzner (October 1990).
13. I am indebted to Julia Lesage for helping me to recall this time, but also for articulating the significance of lesbian feminism for me almost fifteen years ago.
14. Karen Kay and Gerald Peary, 'Interview with Dorothy Arzner,' in *Women and the Cinema*, eds. Karen Kay and Gerald Peary (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977). The interview first appeared in *Cinema*, no. 34 (1974).
15. See Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 215.
16. Stuart Hall, "What is the Black in Black Popular Culture?", paper delivered at the Black Popular Culture Conference, Dia Center for the Arts and the Studio Museum of Harlem, New York (December 1991).
17. On the political significance of authorship for feminism, see Nancy K. Miller, *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 106. Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 212-17, suggests that the female author may be inscribed in the text in a variety of ways, including through voice or character.
18. Richard Dyer, "Believing in Fairies: The Author and the Homosexual," in *Inside/Out*, 188.
19. For an overview of the importance of melodrama in film theory see Christine Gledhill, "Introduction," in *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1987).
20. See Paul Willeman, "Distanciation and Douglas Sirk," *Douglas Sirk*, ed. Laura Mulvey and Jon Halliday (Edinburgh Film Festival, 1972).
21. Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 157, says that the lived spectatorship of gay male and lesbian subcultures is expressed largely through imaginary or displaced relations to the straight meanings of the images and discourses of a parent culture.

22. Mayne, "Lesbian Looks," 120, argues that the "acquisition of heterosexuality becomes the downfall" of the character.

23. For a discussion of this film see Michelle Citron, "Comic Critique The Films of Jan Oxenberg," in *Jump Cut: Hollywood, Politics, and Counter-Cinema*.

24. Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary, "Dorothy Arzner's DANCE, GIRL DANCE," *The Velvet Light Trap* no. 10, (Fall 1973), 26. For an analysis of this subgenre see Charlotte Herzog, "Powder Puff Promotion: The Fashion Show-in-the-Film," in *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body*, eds. Jane M. Gaines and Charlotte Herzog (New York and London: Routledge, 1989).

25. Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985). 27.

26. Edith Becker, Michelle Citron, Julia Lesage, and B. Ruby Rich, "Lesbians and Film," in *Jump Cut: Hollywood, Politics, and Counter-Cinema*, 301.

27. Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972). 109.

28. Jack Babuscio, "Camp and the Gay Sensibility," in *Gays in Film*, ed. Richard Dyer (New York Zoetrope, 1984), 43, sees in camp "an emphasis on sensuous surfaces, textures, imagery and the evocation of mood as stylistic devices — not simply because they are appropriate to the plot, but as fascinating in and of themselves."

29. See Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: Macmillan, 1987), 55 on Marilyn Monroe and female sexual wetness.

30. David Chierichetti, *Hollywood Costume Design* (New York Crown, 1976).

31. Mayne, "Lesbian Looks," 120, says that "virginity" stands for all of the marginal positions Cynthia inhabits.

32. Beverle Houston, "Missing in Action: Notes on Dorothy Arzner," *Wide Angle* 6, no. 3 (1984), 27.

33. See Richard Dyer. "Children of the Night: Vampirism as Homosexuality, Homosexuality as Vampirism," In *Sweet Dreams: Sexuality, Gender and Popular Fiction*, ed. Susannah Radstone, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988).

34. Jane Gaines, "Costume and Narrative: How Dress Tells the Woman's Story," in *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body*, 192-96.

35. Alexander Walker, *Joan Crawford: The Ultimate Star* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 116.

36. Fredrick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884; repr. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972); Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899; repr. New York: Macmillan, 1912).

37. For an overview of the different ways in which the star image has been broken down see my *Contested Culture: The Image, the Voice, and the Law* (Chapel Hill. NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990). 33-40.

38. Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1979). 146-148.

39. Barry King, conversation, fall, 1989.

40. Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, 178-185.

[Go to page 1](#)

---

[To top](#)   [Current issue](#)   [Archived essays](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)

# Film and Photo League exhibition strategies

by Brad Chisholm

from *Jump Cut*, no. 37, July 1992, pp. 110-114

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1992, 2006

The story of the Workers' Film and Photo League has been called one of the great missing chapters of U.S. film history: "great" because the League was one of the first opposition-cinema movements in the nation; "missing" because its platoons of leftist filmmakers disbanded after barely five years of work, and few of their films survive. William Alexander and Russell Campbell's recent scholarship has initiated the recovery of this lost chapter.[1][\[open notes in new window\]](#) Their research concentrates on the League's films and filmmakers. In contrast, I am more interested in learning who actually saw these productions. I believe a nuts-and-bolts account of the League's exhibition and, to an extent, distribution practices, will reveal the link between the films and their intended audiences.

In the 1930's many of the U.S. left considered the news media as establishment tools which served only to minimize the depression's ravages, ignore the country's problems, and to thwart solutions. *New Masses*, *The Daily Worker*, and a host of arts-oriented periodicals led by Workers' Theatre attempted to correct the imbalance in the information given by the news. Similarly, the Workers' Film and Photo League sought to offer the public a clear alternative to the newsreels produced by Fox Movietone, the Hearst organization, and Pathé News. (A producer with two of these commercial outfits responded to left criticism by asserting that it was "none of the movie industry's business or responsibility to deal with the ugly facts.")[2]

The League became frustrated with Hollywood's control of film distribution and resented Hollywood's hold over theatre owners. Out of necessity it pioneered non-theatrical distribution; in particular, it resorted to road-showings. However, advertisements for League film programs in the left press suggest that in order to attract audiences, this oppositional cinema movement had to imitate a number of mainstream distribution and exhibition practices. Between 1931 and 1936 the League achieved some success with its exhibition tactics, but it never enjoyed the stability nor inspired the popularity that its members sought.[3]

The Film and Photo League's parent organization was the Workers' International Relief, a proletariat assistance group founded by the Communist International in 1921. The W.I.R. used film programs to raise money for victims of economic

oppression, fostered the growth of workers' cineclubs in Europe, and capitalized Mezhrabpom Studios in the Soviet Union. The W.I.R. found that documentary and fiction films were effective devices for drawing crowds and building solidarity among the world's workers. During the Twenties the W.I.R.'s William Kruse toured the United States with five documentaries he had either shot or compiled as a result of trips to Germany and the Soviet Union.[5]

The organization made two films, PASSAIC TEXTILE STRIKE and GASTONIA, which documented labor actions in this country, and by the end of the decade had begun building a library of Soviet features for distribution here.[6] In December, 1930, the W.I.R. established the Workers' Film and Photo League. Among its first members were Harry Alan Potamkin, Sam Brody, Leo Hurwitz, Leo Seltzer, and Tom Brandon. Based initially at the New York, West 28th Street offices of the W.I.R., the League took charge of maintaining the prints from the collection of Soviet films and producing photographs and films to document the depression.[7] The W.I.R. provided film stock and some equipment, and it was understood that the initial audience for the films would be Communist Party locals and sympathetic workers' organizations around the country. The Washington, D.C. Hunger March, Bonus March, and May Day demonstrations of 1931 gave the League ample material with which to begin a series called WORKERS' NEWSREEL and eventually compile the feature film, HUNGER.

Within a year of the New York group's formation, other Film and Photo League chapters had been established in Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and San Francisco. In addition to sponsoring screenings of Soviet productions and occasional films of their own, these provincial branches contributed footage to WORKERS' NEWSREEL, held photo exhibits, organized symposia on the present state of mass media, and held dances and other fund-raising events.[8] For example, in March, 1932, the new Los Angeles chapter invited the public to attend a gala which featured such celebrities as Margaret Bourke-White, Langston Hughes, and King Vidor. It was a kick-off event with a 35-cent admission charge and included speeches and dancing. Two years later the Los Angeles chapter sponsored a similar event at which it was announced that Slavko Vorkapich had offered to participate in League film production.[9] There is no evidence that Vidor or Vorkapich ever actually participated in League production, although the Los Angeles chapter itself was responsible for at least three short documentaries between 1932 and 1934.[10]

During the Film and Photo League's brief life, the New York chapter functioned as the W.I.R.'s center of national film activity. Many film programs, whether they consisted purely of Soviet productions or contained league films, were packaged and distributed, after the spring of 1931, from the League's new headquarters on East 14th Street.[11] Tom Brandon, who orchestrated the distribution, sometimes toured with the film programs and gave a talk prior to the screenings.[12] He played many of the exhibition sites Kruse had visited several years earlier, such as the People's auditorium in Chicago and the Tolstoi Club in Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The life history of a typical New York Film and Photo League production went something like this: first, an executive committee would dispatch a film crew to some national trouble spot where they would have a fair chance of filming

demonstrations. Once there, the film crew shot its footage, and if they had access to the necessary facilities nearby, they would screen the rushes on site for the benefit of the demonstrators. Leo Seltzer claims this was a tremendous morale booster.[13] Next, the film would be sent back to New York where it would most likely be edited into an installment of **WORKERS' NEWSREEL** or the **AMERICAN TODAY SERIES**. Then the episode would become part of a traveling program headlined by a major Soviet feature. That program would either be road-showed across the country or booked by interested theatres, regional League chapters, or miscellaneous workers' clubs. Finally, when the events depicted in a given newsreel installment were no longer current, the footage would become part of a compilation feature film organized around a general theme. (**HUNGER** and **PORTRAIT OF AMERICA** are exemplary productions).[14] To include League films in a package or program was the best way to ensure that audiences would see them.

Occasionally League members were able to persuade mainstream exhibitors to slip a League newsreel into whatever Hollywood program they might be running. One League installment ran for at least three days in mid-1934 at the Rialto in New York, but such instances were exceptional.[15] Most exhibitors contracted with large newsreel companies and there were no real openings for installments from outsiders. Moreover, the Film and Photo League output was sporadic and could not be easily squeezed onto schedules which were the products of extended block-booking.

The Film and Photo League program established these programs as a vehicle with which to circumvent Hollywood's dominion. However, this program was modeled after the typical format of Hollywood theatrical distribution, which consisted of a live act, cartoon, newsreel, and feature film. The League's "live act" would be a speaker, someone such as Ed Royce from the *Daily Worker*, who traveled with the film 1905 for two months in 1933.[16] League member Tom Brandon frequently gave a talk, "Hollywood Today," to introduce League screenings at exhibition sites within a one hundred mile radius of New York City in 1932.[17] At other times lawyers from the International Labor Defender group spoke. In every instance the orator stumped for the cause to a crowd that had come to see movies.

Based on their titles, the speeches seemed tailored to popular interest. They did not sound politically narrow, exclusive, or intimidating. Judging from the ads, cartoons were big drawing cards. W.I.R. programs from 1930 occasionally used Chaplin shorts to kick off the film portion of the program, but with the advent of respectable 16mm sound equipment, the League's ads began to sport the phrase "includes latest Soviet sound cartoon" in type nearly as prominent as the feature's title.[18] The specific titles of the cartoons do not appear. Next on the bill was the newsreel: the one or two reels of film actually produced by the League. Between 1931 and 1934 at least 16 episodes of **WORKERS' NEWSREEL** were made. Viewers of a League program would have seen episodes with such titles as **TOM MOONEY DEMONSTRATION**, **ALBANY HUNGER MARCH**, and **RENT STRIKES**. The League did not build each program around one of its newsreels, though.

The demand for programs was higher than League production could match. Regular exhibitors such as New York's Acme or Cameo Theatres changed their bills weekly, and sometimes semi-weekly.[19] The League therefore borrowed from the W.I.R.'s reserve of Soviet newsreels. The October, 1932, run of a film entitled **THE**

FORTY-FIRST at the 28th and Broadway Theatre, Manhattan, included a League production referred to as a "special." A year later that Soviet feature had toured the country and was back in New York at the Acme, along with "the latest Soviet and American newsreels."<sup>[20]</sup> The program was again constructed around the Soviet feature.

TEN DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD, ROAD TO LIFE, and CHINA EXPRESS received the most exposure of any features on League circuits between 1931 and 1934. At least two prints of these films circulated in the country after 1933, as evidenced by several simultaneous playdates.<sup>[21]</sup> The features represented the best of Soviet drama. Eisenstein and Pudovkin's names were often placed above the titles.<sup>[22]</sup> Promotions often included descriptive phrases which emphasized the films' stature as well as entertainment value. Entertainment was, after all, what the program's model attempted to exploit.<sup>[23]</sup>

The packaged Film and Photo League programs emanated from the New York offices. Tom Brandon made the New York chapter the center of distribution for the national League. Regional chapters would swap footage among themselves, but paid a flat rate of \$1.50 per reel for New York chapter footage.<sup>[24]</sup> Brandon could charge because the New York chapter had the greatest quantity and the most sought-after newsreel footage of any of the chapters. The regional chapters were dependent on the New York branch. This is at least partially due to the fact that the New York group planted the seeds that formed the regional Film and Photo Leagues. By sending a film program on tour, the League was able to stimulate interest in as well as demand for more programs.

The national tour of a program headlined by CANONS OR TRACTORS may have even bolstered party membership in sections of the Midwest. Shortly after reports of unexpectedly high turnouts for the film in Minnesota and northern Michigan, there came the announcement that a Minneapolis Photo League was forming.<sup>[25]</sup> Later progress reports in the *Daily Worker* indicate that the new group had begun photo production and was trying to raise money for film equipment. There is no evidence that this chapter ever began film production, but in the summer of 1932 the Minneapolis chapter became the latest Film and Photo League exhibitor.<sup>[26]</sup> Whenever it held membership drives or fundraising affairs, it was able to turn to the New York office for the latest available Soviet feature and workers' film program. Unlike the League, the commercial film industry was long past road-showing to build audiences. However, both enterprises had the same city as the hub of their activity.

League exhibition sites fall into three categories. Theatrical precursors of what we call "art houses" for a time provided the steadiest showcases; they tended to get first crack at each of the latest Soviet features as it became available. Second, some screening facilities alternated League programs with other, often unrelated, non-film programs. Some of these were playhouses; some were public auditoriums; others were ethnic workers' halls with a good deal of space to rent.<sup>[27]</sup> The third group of exhibition sites were smaller labor temples and workers' clubs — meeting halls that could not accommodate large audiences and which tended to get Soviet features only after they had been screened at more spacious facilities in the same city.<sup>[28]</sup>

Hollywood organized its exhibitors into a first-run, second-run, third-run

hierarchy. The Film and Photo League was not in a position to do the same, but out of necessity it did establish its own hierarchy. It only had a limited number of prints that could circulate at a given time, and certain screening places were more comfortable and conducive to film viewing than others. If the League gave priority to the Art Cinema Theatre in Cleveland, the Punch and Judy Theatre in Chicago, or the Acme Theatre in New York, it was because those places had permanent projection equipment and could even accommodate 35mm sound films.[29] Art houses drew regular, if not proletarian, audiences. These theatres catered to those interested in European films. While Soviet features such as ARSENAL and THE END OF ST. PETERSBURG were their mainstay between 1931 and 1934, they offered films of Murnau and Dreyer, too. The Acme Theatre's ads in the *Daily Worker* billed the place as "The Workers' Acme Theatre," whereas its ads in the establishment press simply called it "The Acme." [30]

The group responsible for programming at the Acme and Cameo theatres in Manhattan was Symon Gould's Film Arts Guild, an organization more interested in alternative aesthetics than alternative politics.[31] When League programs premiered at these theatres, it was usually without the benefit of a flesh-and-blood orator. Gould's group was so interested in League newsreels, though, that the Acme and Cameo would advance \$25 to \$50 to the League to ensure the availability of its next newsreel offering.[32] Other art houses were less loyal to the League but took advantage of its collection of Soviet features and its connections with Mezhrabpom Studios. For instance, the Philkino Theatre in Philadelphia, despite any implied convictions in its name, had no qualms about running a Film and Photo League program one week and a film denounced by the League the next. It ran ROAD TO LIFE and the latest American newsreels on September 30, 1933, and by October 3 its bill changed to include THUNDER OVER MEXICO, the reworking of Eisenstein material which the League ideologues considered butchery.[33]

The art theatre audience was not as politically focused as were audiences at the League's other exhibition sites. Among "sometimes" exhibitors was the Franklin Theatre in New York, which ran League programs between engagements of legitimate stage productions.[34] The League seems to have had a number of these "sometimes showcases" across the country, ranging from New York's Stuyvesant Casino with its "ten large halls, ideal for banquets, weddings, bar mitzvahs, meetings, and conventions," to the People's Auditorium in Chicago, and the hall in Los Angeles which the local League chapter rented for its May Day galas.[35] While art houses often premiered new Soviet features in the major cities, the League favored the second kind of site for road shows. These places attracted audiences less reticent about having political speakers precede an evening's entertainment than art house patrons would have been. The places' very names (e.g., Liberty Hall, Czechoslovakian Workers House Incorporated) might shape audience expectations.[36]

The third kind of showcases were used by road-show productions when larger facilities were unavailable.[37] These smaller meeting halls were not continually booked for various programming. They did not attempt to accommodate conventions; rather they provided regular meeting places for Communist Party and labor locals, which could be adapted for screenings if necessary. The Ukrainian Home and Lithuanian Hall in Chicago, and the Romanian Hall in nearby Gary may have been exemplary. I do not know how big they were, but whenever they offered

film programs, the features were those which had already played at People's Auditorium.[38]

Unlike Hollywood's first-run, second-run, third-run hierarchy, the League's informal divisions did not have a difference in admission prices. During the first half of the Thirties, exhibitors of League programs charged between 15-cents and 35-cents for admission. The Acme consistently charged the least; some of the group-three sites charged the most.[39]

This probably happened because theatres like the Acme changed their bills as attendance warranted it. They wanted patrons to return once or twice each week and used a low price as enticement. The typical worker's hall may have gotten a big film program only once or twice a year, and the admission it charged often benefited some cause. In contrast to Hollywood exhibition practice, the relation between art house and meeting hall screenings was almost the inverse of that between picture palace and rural movie house.

I mentioned that League members denounced certain films. The League was often involved in demonstrations and picketed theatres which featured pro-Nazi films. Other members felt that overemphasizing protesting slighted the League's primary function. By the mid-Thirties this schism contributed to the New York group's demise. Leo Hurwitz, Ralph Steiner, and Irving Lerner broke away to form the production group, Nykino; Seltzer defected to the W.P.A.; and the still photographers struck out on their own as well.[40] After 1934 Tom Brandon devoted all his attention to his newly formed Garrison Films distributing company. Garrison maintained advertisements in the leftist press but also promoted various Hollywood titles such as THE INVISIBLE MAN along with a collection of Polish comedies and Soviet dramas.[41] After the W.L.R. collapsed in 1935, the New York Film and Photo League cosponsored some productions with Nykino and other groups during the next two years. However, the League was effectively out of business by 1937.[42]

Gilbert Seldes wrote that a documentary could consider itself a success if it could "force exhibitors to go outside their commercial contracts" in order to show it.[43] The Film and Photo League could never really count on being able to do this. Instead, it established a complementary outlet for its product. During the first half of the Thirties, residents of this country's major cities could see perhaps a different Soviet feature each month. Residents of many smaller cities which contained a Communist Party local or a group of people interested in starting one could perhaps encounter a Soviet feature once or twice per year. In either case, the viewer stood a fair chance of seeing a League newsreel on the program.

The story of the Film and Photo League movement hinges on the rise and fall of the New York chapter. Certainly that branch served as a center, and existing research has solidified this reputation. What remains to be documented is the League activity that transpired outside of New York. When provincial chapters grew up, they aspired to do production, yet while the Detroit, Chicago, and Los Angeles branches did make a handful of films, that was not the case with the Boston, Minneapolis, Washington D.C., or Laredo, Texas groups.[44] The most significant activity of the regional chapters lay in their role as components of a loosely-formed distribution network, and in their members' efforts to approach theatres, rent facilities, and create new sites for exhibition.

## NOTES

JUMP CUT has published important articles and discussions of The Film and Photo League movement of the 1930s. Most of these issues are still available from us. We printed Special Sections in JUMP CUT, no. 14 (\$2.00! \$230 abroad) and no. 19 (now out of print). We'll sell you all three Film and Photo League issues for \$5.00 (\$6.00 abroad).

1. The most comprehensive studies of the Film and Photo League can be found in William Alexander's *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931 to 1941* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); and Russell Campbell's *Cinema Strikes Back! Radical Filmmaking in the United States: 1930-1942* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982).
2. Quoted in Fred Sweet, Eugene Roscow, and Allan Francovich, "Interview with Tom Brandon," *Film Quarterly* (Fall 1973) 26:13. This producer was Terry Ramsaye, author of *A Million and One Nights*.
3. Tom Brandon, "What's Doing in the Film and Photo League Branches," *Daily Worker*, Sept. 14, 1934, p.5; and other optimistic League progress reports (*New Masses*, July 1934 p. 16; *Workers' Theatre*, July, 1933, p. 9) appear especially idealistic in retrospect. The greatest disappointment may have been the League's inability to get its National Film Exchange off the ground (Campbell, p. 66).
4. Richard Taylor. *The Politics of Soviet Cinema: 1917-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 73-4; for the history of W.I.R. film involvement, see Vance Kepley, Jr., 'The Workers' International Relief and the Cinema of the Left: 1921 1935,' *Cinema Journal* (Fall 1983) 23:7-23.
5. From an unpublished interview with William Kruse, by Russell Merritt and Vance Kepley, Jr., Jan. 18. 1975. All subsequent information on Kruse is from this source unless otherwise indicated.
6. Campbell, p. 35.
7. Alexander, p. 7. cf. Sam Brady's 'The Movie as Weapon Against the Working Class,' *Daily Worker*, May 29, 1930, p. 4; Seymour Stern's film column in *Left* (Spring 1931) 1: 69; Sweet, Rostow, Francovich, p. 14.
8. Russell Campbell, "Interview with Sam Brody," JUMP CUT 14 (March 1977), pp. 28-30. Cf. *Daily Worker*, July 30, 1934, p. 5; May 24, 1934, p. 5; June 9, 1933, p. 2.
9. "Los Angeles Photo League Holds Affair," *Daily Worker*, March 15, 1932, p. 2, Slavko Vorkapich, Cinema Technician, Backs Film and Photo League Program," *Daily Worker*, July 25, 1934, p. 5.
10. This information is based on the League filmography in JUMP CUT 14 (March 1977). The titles attributed to L.A. are IMPERIAL VALLEY, TOM MOONEY, and CANNON FODDER. On July 25, 1934, the *Daily Worker* reported that the New York chapter was about to screen a program that included BLOODY MEMORIAL DAY IN LOS ANGELES. This may have been an alternate title for one of the above-mentioned films.

11. Cambell, *Cinema Strikes Back* p. 39; *Close-Up* (Sept. 1932), p. 213.
12. Sweet, Rostow, Francovich, p. 21.
13. Russell Cambell, "An Interview with Leo Seltzer," *JUMP CUT* 14 (March 1977) pp. 25-27.
14. Since so few of the films survive and because they were often known by different titles, it is difficult to make this claim with certainty. Alexander (p. 28) and Campbell (p. 79), for example, give slightly different accounts of the status of HUNGER. However, on the basis of the previously cited interviews with Brandon, Brady, Selzer, and David Plait's comments in *JUMP CUT* 16 (Nov. 1977), p. 37, there does seem to have been a trend toward longer films and giving old footage new life via editing.
15. Sweet, Rostow, and Francovich, p. 22; *Daily Worker*, June 13, 1934, p. 2.
16. *Daily Worker*, August 29, 1933, p. 2; Sept. 14, 1933, p. 2.
17. Sweet, Rostow, Francovich, p. 21.
18. *Daily Worker*, Oct. 21, 1932, p. 2; Oct. 12, 1933, p. 5.
19. *Daily Worker*, Oct. 3, 1932, p. 2; Oct. 6, 1932, p. 2; Oct. 10, 1932. p. 2.
20. *Daily Worker*, Oct. 21, 1932, p. 2; Oct. 21, 1933. p. 2. The original premier screening of THE FORTY-FIRST was delayed one week for "technical reasons" so in its place the 28th and Broadway booked seven newsreels from the Film and Photo League, some of which may have been Soviet productions. The tides; KILLING TO LIVE, REVOLT IN THE DESERT, FIGHT FOR THE BONUS, BLOODY THURSDAY, MARCH OF THE VETS, FUNERAL OF PRIVATE HOTCHKA, FUNERAL OF PRIVATE CARLSON.
21. *Daily Worker*, Jan. 15, 1931, p. 2 Feb. 2, 1931, p. 2; Dec. 17, 1933, p. 5.
22. Pudovkin's name is prominently displayed for all *Daily Worker* ads for 1905. Eisenstein's is similarly pronounced except in connection with some ads of TEN DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD, the re-edited, sound-tracked version of OCTOBER. The name of John Reed, author of the book *Ten Days that Shook the World*, appears in lieu of the director's (e.g., *Daily Worker*, Nov. 21, 1930, p. 2).
23. "A sensational Sovkino production," *Daily Worker*, Oct. 24, 1930, p. 2; "A human interest story of the gigantic Five-Year Plan," *Daily Worker*, March 9, 1932, p. 2.
24. Bert Hogenkamp, *Workers' Newsreels in the 1920s and 1930s*, Our History Series, No. 68 (London: Communist Party of Great Britain, n.d.), p. 32 Campbell's Seltzer interview, p. 26.
25. "Eager to See Soviet Films," *Daily Worker*. April 30, 1932, p. 2.
26. "Minnesota Photo League to Teach Making of Movies and Stills," *Daily*

*Worker*, May 23, 1932, p. 2.

27. For example, the New Estonian Workers' Home which promoted itself with "Splendid, large, balls, dances, lectures, meetings," at 27-29 West 113th St. NYC, *Daily Worker*, Jan, 5, 1933, p. 2.
28. There were exceptions to this resulting from the huge appetite of the art houses. Places such as New York's Acme and St. Mark's Theatres, and the Film Art in Los Angeles regularly resorted to the "back by popular demand" tactic. Favorites such as ROAD TO LIFE often played the art houses after having made appearances at workers' locals in the same city.
29. Sometime in 1932 it became apparent to the League that any hopes of building a successful distribution circuit depended on the ability of non-theatrical exhibitors to accommodate sound films. Alexander implies that problems relating to sound contributed to the League's collapse (pp. 42-43).
30. *Daily Worker*, October 15, 1932, p. 2; *New York Times*, October 14, 1932, p. 23.
31. *New Masses*, (Jan. 1929) p. 36. Symon Gould's Film Arts Guild eventually became the Film Guild Cinema.
32. Sweet, Rostow, Francovich, p. 22.
33. Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back*, p. 48; *Daily Worker*, Sept. 30, 1933, p. 5; Oct. 3, 1933, p. 5.
34. On Tuesday, October 11, 1932, SNIPER opened at the Franklin with Film and Photo League short subjects. One week later Paul Muni opened there in a play with a run of not less than three weeks. *Daily Worker*, October 11, 1932, p. 2; Oct. 18, 1932, p. 2; Oct. 26, 1932, p. 2.
35. Stuyvesant Casino ad is from *Daily Worker*, Oct. 22, 1932, p. 2. People's Auditorium was frequently used for CP-backed programs between 1929 and 1935, some of which involved film, others involved dancing (*Daily Worker*, Sept. 28, 1933, p. 5); and judging from references in the *Daily Worker* on March 15, 1932, p. 2, and July 25, p. 5, the Los Angeles location was somewhere other than the chapter hall.
36. Liberty Hall was in Milwaukee and a showplace for the 1933 road show of 1905 (*Daily Worker*, Sept. 16, 1933); The Czechoslovakian Workers' Hall Incorporated advertised itself with "Meeting Rooms and Hall to Hire," 347 E. 72nd St., NYC, *Daily Worker*, Oct. 15, 1932, p. 2.
37. It is impossible to know for certain exactly how different facilities compared on the basis of the ads alone, but it is revealing that People's Auditorium boasted of at least 19 separate film programs between 1929 and 1935 while the Lithuanian Hall and the Ukrainian Home are only mentioned with films on the handful of occasions that road shows passed through Chicago.
38. *Daily Worker*, Sept. 16, 1933, p. 4.
39. The common price for places such as the Finnish-Workers' House and the

Workers' Center (a CP meeting hall), both in New York City, was 20-cents in advance, 25-cents at the door.

40. Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back*, pp. 58-65

41. *Daily Worker*, Feb. 16, 1936, p. 5.

42. Campbell, p. 66.

43. Gilbert Seldes, 'THE RIVER" from Lewis Jacobs' *The Documentary Tradition* (New York: Hopkinson, Blake, 1971), pp. 123-25.

44. Alexander, p. 42.

# *In the Shadow of the Stars* Opera chorus singers

by Sara Halprin

from *Jump Cut*, no. 37, July 1992, pp. 115-119

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1992, 2006

This article was submitted to JUMP CUT a year before IN THE SHADOW OF THE STARS won the Oscar at the 1992 Academy Awards for best documentary.

---

"The subject is the San Francisco Opera Chorus, one of the world's finest, whose singers play a major role in making the opera grand, yet are seldom noticed as they portray masses of peasants, ladies-in-waiting, soldiers and slaves. Our film tells their stories and dreams, and explores the traits and circumstances that determine who becomes a star and who remains in the background. Using portions from eight operas to parallel and comment on individuals' life stories, we examine the blurred boundary between private lives and the staged spectacle. Subjects are filmed in dressing rooms, rehearsals, performances, auditions, and special dramatic scenes: a soprano's tea party, a tenors' high note competition. IN THE SHADOW OF THE STARS goes beyond the portrayal of choristers, for it mirrors the lives of all who aspire to be soloists, and all common people who have ever dreamed of being stars?"

— Irving Saraf, co-director

For the past five years I have been a friendly witness to the laborious construction of a feature-length documentary film about the lives of choristers in the San Francisco Opera, called IN THE SHADOW OF THE STARS.<sup>[1]</sup>[\[open notes in new window\]](#) STARS, which will be shown on PBS following its first theatrical run, is of interest to opera-lovers and non-opera-lovers like myself, offering a humane and lively perspective on opera as an art of and for the people.

There is something that seems paradoxical about making a documentary on opera that focuses on the choristers' working lives. Opera is commonly thought of as "high art," the kind of art which gets funding, along with ballet, when most other forms are severely limited or repressed. Yet, as the film shows, opera has a history and a present reality of broad-based appeal to working people, an appeal reflected in the contemporary popularity of opera's electronic cousin, the soaps. The subject

matter of opera is often melodramatic, emphasizing intense emotion, sexual passion, jealousy, revenge, embodied in the stars and witnessed and reflected in the massed chorus[2].

In a collage approach appropriate to a film about opera, which itself combines music, theater and visual art, IN THE SHADOW OF THE STARS uses dramatic footage of opera performance, cinema-vérité style footage of rehearsals and backstage life, direct to camera interviews with choristers, and scenes, informal or staged, realistic or abstract, from the choristers' offstage lives.

Opera music, dialogue and visuals are juxtaposed in such a way as to draw attention to the ways in which the choristers' lives reflect and resemble the operas they love. When Sigmund, a tenor who was once committed to a mental ward and who continued to practice music over the objections of his doctors, tells his story, the visuals cut from his face to the exterior of a psychiatric hospital to the Bedlam scene from Stravinsky's opera *The Rake's Progress*, as the music fades up over his voice.

"I continued to sing...to a point where the doctors had to tell me to shut up, I was making so much noise and disturbing the other patients by singing opera...the force of music saved me." — Sigmund, from the film

The choristers rise from rows of boxes, in a surreal set designed by David Hockney, no more surreal than the visuals of gaping windows and wrecked buildings in the south Bronx today, which accompany Sigmund's account of his childhood with a crazy mother in a south Bronx tenement. Claudia, a mezzo who works to become a soprano, is seen singing in the chorus and talking about her life directly to the camera in a very theatrical manner, then joking with other choristers as she makes up in the dressing room. When she tells her story of breaking up with her husband over an opera audition failure — a fight that took place alongside the river in Florence, the visuals are abstract, broken reflections of a man and woman reflected in water, gesturing strongly. The soprano's tea party is a stylized scene, very like a stage set, of a group of sopranos eating together in a lavish setting, served by waiters, with fancy tableware and linens, as the women talk shop. Christine's account of her travels in Europe in search of operatic employment is accompanied by abstract visuals of scenery seen through train windows. When Frederick, a strong baritone, speaks of his anger at discrimination against blacks and of how he would love the role of Rigoletto, the hunchback, we see colorful designs for the opera, *Rigoletto*, and dramatized images of the hunchback, as well as Frederick singing solo and in the chorus with full dramatic affect.

"The public is not yet ready to see a black male in power. Non-blacks they've been darkening for years...make me lighter, put a wig on me, shave my beard off...If I can sing it, fine. Fix me up visually to be what you want." — Frederick, from the film

The film is unabashed as a construction of its subject. Like an essay in written form, it doesn't hesitate to use stylistic devices to make a point, and it makes no assumptions about the inherent "truth" of its portrayals. Singers speak about the enormous work involved in becoming a star, about their own ambivalence at putting everything else on hold, about discrimination, about luck. More rarely, they speak of conscious choice. One man says that when he met his wife he realized that

she had the determination to become a star, much more than he did, so he quit his job as soloist and went back to the chorus in order to support her career. A truck driver, who practices singing with sheet music propped on the dashboard of his rig, explains that his father was also a truck driver who loved opera. As a child he hated opera, but changed as he grew older. Sigmund says that music was his ticket out of the Bronx. Shelly and Carl practice a love duet from *Don Giovanni* as their young son competes with the music by screaming for attention.

"You have to become a part of a unit And at the same time maintain an individual identity." — Frederick, from the film

There is a central tension in the film between individual expression and fulfillment, and the needs and pressures of the collective. In dressing-room discussions and directly to the camera, choristers speak of the need to simultaneously blend in and stand out, to harness their artistic temperaments and yet use all the energy of those same temperaments, to support the collective scene and the performances of the soloists, all the while dreaming of themselves stepping forward individually to receive thunderous applause. The dilemma is one well-known in independent film, which is so often a collective creative enterprise undertaken by chance gatherings of strong personalities and therefore plagued by strife, especially when profit is not, realistically speaking, a strong motive.[3] Choristers discuss the difficulties of relating intimately on stage to a person they dislike strongly, of creating convincing fight scenes without allowing backstage tensions to erupt into onstage brawls, of standing behind a soloist while feeling they themselves could finish the aria better, all this in addition to the usual demands of singing, acting, behaving in accordance with high theatrical standards, usually after a full day of other work.

Money, the need to work for it, the limitations of not having enough of it, the hierarchies created by unequal possession of it, becomes a strong recurrent motif in the film, which is at once critical of the contemporary situation and celebratory of the creative will which prevails even under strong pressure and injustice. An issue which is not raised in the film is the stardom created by the filmmaker's selection of each chorister, the influence on each of them of the presence of a camera crew, the knowledge that what they are doing and saying is being recorded. While this is an issue in any documentary film utilizing direct footage, or in any interview situation, it is especially important in this film because of the centrality of the issue of stardom.

"The chorus singers of IN THE SHADOW OF THE STARS who are, by day, civil servants, housewives, truck drivers, teachers and, by night, serfs, soldiers, gypsies, slaves, serve as our emotional standins, providing access to the staged drama and to the lives of the principal players. What endures in opera are not the love affairs, or deaths, of Kings and Queens, what endures is the mirror held to the audience so that we may recognize the experiences as our own." — Allie Light, co-director

As a viewer unfamiliar with opera, and as a documentary filmmaker, teacher, and therapist used to working with people who are shy of cameras and unconscious about their own "presence," I was especially struck in this film by the strong presence of the choristers, their relationship to the filmmakers, to the camera, to each other. When I asked the film makers how they selected among the many

interviews they filmed for the final cut of the film, they responded that they chose those choristers whose lives were "most operatic," who could therefore best stand for many other choristers and many of the viewing audience. I think this helps to account for a certain compelling quality the film has. I find myself glued to it, finding parts to identify with in each character. That is to say, the film itself functions like the opera it is about, in the sense that its stars, people who are not stars on the opera stage, constellate the range of intense emotions in the film's viewers that the main figures in the opera constellate in the opera's audience. At the same time, by interweaving so many main characters, and by bringing in the whole subject of choristers' lives and ambitions and struggles as specifically different from those of stars, the film creates a detachment and reflexivity not often seen in opera (Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* is a clear exception).

The choristers, as a group, come across as people with a common link of passion for their art and also their craft, and a wide diversity of personal experience and character. They are specifically contrasted in the film with the stars, whom they idealize, envy, gossip about, and do not identify with except ironically or in dreams of the future. The working choristers featured in the film are also contrasted with the rich members of the audience who arrive dressed in costumes no less elaborate or fanciful than those worn on stage by the chorus.

On the other hand, the choristers are linked closely with the audience in the lower-priced seats, which includes their own family, lovers, and friends. One man's lover tells of how the difficulties of being an "opera widow" are offset by the pleasures of going to the opera and watching his lover perform; the singer-partner responds that on the nights his lover is present he knows at least one person is watching him. Christine, the hopeful soprano, is shown watching a video of her giving a solo performance, fascinated by the image on the screen which she does not quite identify as herself. A meticulously constructed documentary with a social conscience, STARS includes the range of class, race, gender, and sexual orientation of the chorus. This was done consciously by the filmmakers, who used dramatizations and extensive interviewing until they achieved representation. The issue of age is not strongly addressed, although it is felt as a pressure in the background.

Communications and systems theories stress the importance of the unidentified or disturbing element, the carrier of new information which may, by its refusal or inability to be assimilated, force change of the entire system. As STARS fades to black on my video screen (I've been writing from a video copy of the film), I wonder what its entry into the perilous world of independent documentary will be, for the film, for the choristers, and for the directors. Allie Light and Irving Saraf, and the somewhat mysterious Chas, Allie's first husband, an opera chorister to whose memory the film is dedicated, are the most shadowy and tantalizing stars of the film, the artists whose presence is indicated but never clearly delineated.[4]

I asked Allie Light to send me any journal entries she wrote about the production of the film. Here's one about a very strong but virtually unrepresented element of the film, the inspiration which led to its making:

"Yesterday was the last day of our sound mix. Sitting in the theater, watching our movie in its first, full-costumed performance — all its dialogue, music, effects in stereo — our beloved subjects in full array,

their lives frozen in a drama that begins and ends so neatly (Daniel: 'I'm 41 now,' is already 43) — I began to think about how Chas would come home from rehearsals when we were first married and, late at night in the kitchen, act out the entire opera for me. He carried an 8mm camera on stage, under his costume, and made movies. I remember how he taped all the shiny parts of the camera with black tape so there would be no reflections. How we laughed at Bjorling as he lunged stiffly at Azucena or Leonora. The silent singers lurching on the screen and Chas singing all their parts. Now I'm the one who makes movies and how I wish he was here to be the singer again. This movie is for you, Chas. Pieces of your movie are cut up and inserted into ours. Salute!"

In 1958, as a young chorister Charles Hilder smuggled an 8mm camera onstage under his costume and filmed silent black and white performances of the stars and backstage activities of the choristers. STARS incorporates this footage as a testimony to the love of choristers for opera stars, and as a commentary on backstage tradition. As radicals, both Light and Saraf believe in the importance of making connections between art and people's lives, and this belief has been a priority in the construction of STARS. As humane people, they are deeply interested in others, and form lasting friendships with their subjects and fellow workers. As experienced filmmakers, they know the importance of reflecting, in a detached and compassionate manner, on the self-presentation of their subjects. This then allows us to reflect on what we see, hear, and feel. In each of the choristers' portraits there is more than one message being given at once. There're a primary identity of being a chorister, which varies for each individual, and a more secondary identity, even more varied, perhaps to be a star, or to be a chorister in a particular way, or something else, only hinted at nonverbally. Both identities demand attention and support. Each chorister is a star and a non-star, and displays some ambivalence about each role. The complexity of that double message is carried in many different ways by the film, which itself reflects some of that same ambivalence.

IN THE SHADOW OF THE STARS: THE LIVES OF SINGERS is an apt title, evoking the shadowy aspects of U.S. culture which the film illuminates and asks us to reflect upon, essential questions for each of us about the purpose of our lives, where our passions reside and how we express them, what place creativity has, and how it is defined and recognized. If the singers in this film stand for a cultural chorus, how does their (non)relation to the stars reflect upon our (non)relationship with our stars, those whose pictures look back at us from magazine covers and TV talk shows? What exactly is it that we dream of, yearn for, when we dream of stardom? What isn't happening in our lives right now? What is? The film's open, questioning structure, which begins in shadow, as the camera pans over hooded and robed silhouettes of the chorus in the "Patria Oppressa" scene from Verdi's *Macbeth*, holds right through the end, which is actually the beginning of a performance we never see, the entrance of an actor upon the stage filmed as his exit from backstage, hopeful and nervous, seeking recognition from another audience.

"All of us are stars. Some are greater stars and some are smaller stars. It's like a constellation... people who fill out the heavens like the Milky Way, that's the chorus. And they are stars, too. And they're us." — Paul,

from the film

#### FROM ALLIE LIGHT'S FILM JOURNAL

"Cutting the folks going to the opera in their fancy clothes: We pulled the shots we liked the best and strung them together, saying, 'Don't worry about the order.' We started with the last footage where Michael had put the camera on the ground. The angle makes the sidewalk look like a raked stage and the people, hurrying through the carriage gate in the twilight hour climb up and away from the camera POV, the long dresses of the women-longer and more flaring looked at from below-float out behind. We added a pan of animal rights people holding signs, and then more shots of opera-goers. We dropped in footage of a wandering opera singer with his sign, 'Help me get to Rome for an audition on Sept. 27th.' The carriage entrance filled up with people coming from dinner and they were like a thick swarm. Michael was very bold and he literally swam through the mass of ladies and gems, so we have our pick of marvelous shots: A woman at the top of the stairs is like a preening bird and, as she strikes a pose, a man in a top hat with a large pipe joins her. A very old couple start up the stairs and she stumbles in frame left. A beat later he stumbles in frame right. The camera circles a young woman with lots of hair; an old man steps into the shot and says, isn't she nice?' and they walk away."

"We spend a day stringing these shots together. The sound is all over the place and we finally turn it off to see if our cuts work. The next day we look at the segment-it's too long, it doesn't work. What was it we had in mind? These people are putting on their own show — this is opera, too. The same thing here as on the stage — another performance. We start cutting. Out goes all but one animal rights sign. We keep, 'People wearing fur go home.'

"Out goes the stumbling stair climbers — too subtle, you'd have to look at the shot at least twice to notice them. We add an extreme CU of feet with the dress hem in the top of the frame. This goes in at the head. We cut the itinerant tenor to a third of what he was. We add a walking shot of a woman in a sparkly dress. She walks, walks, walks, until a flash bulb goes off beside her."

"Today we like our segment better. It holds. What sound should go under? Natural sounds — footsteps, street singer, shouting protesters? Music? We throw ideas. What about a march? *Aida*? Wagner? The flight of the valkyries — these strutting women are certainly one type of Wagnerian maiden. 'How about a Mozart opera where everyone sings at once,' I say. That could be either wonderful, or just plain stupid — ensemble singing behind people greeting one another, kissing cheeks, etc. But then for any of these ideas, we'd have to buy needledown [fee for using music, determined by each time the needle on the record player touches down]. Or what about the witches' music from *Macbeth*? We've used it, but only the second entrance. Their opening music is a little different.

"Irving says, let's try something.'He puts a second soundtrack on the Kem and begins to fiddle with it — moving it back and forth to fit the feet CU. Suddenly the feet are taking steps that were never intended — not marching or dancing, but a magical walk out of the frame. We let these people play out their dramatic moment, their cultivated gesture to Verdi's *Macbeth* overture. It's all here in this music — a little 'witches,' a hint of Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene, the foreshadowing of the rise and fall of tyrants and the unbelievable Patria Oppressa.

"Now we're hooked in like a trolley on a track. We've got the basics, we're not going to lose our creation — now we can play. This is the fun part of editing — the tightening, the throwing out of all but what hits in the gut. We're going to shape this scene into a little jewel. The music rises for the feet, the raked street, and dips under at the fur sign as the VO shouts, 'There are no new furs, somebody wore it before!' As the music crescendos, the man with the pipe turns to the pigeon woman and the old couple start for the stairs. *Macbeth* is dipped again for the street-tenor's aria lost in mid-phrase as the camera moves on to the sparkly woman whose footsteps disappear as the rising overture mimics her walk. She never makes it to the exploding flashbulb — we cut her in half — because a line of people suddenly floats sideways on violins and violas so light as to be their personal dream. Tears spring into my eyes; this is the transformative moment. The music rises, the camera swings to the girl-the maiden-and the man leers, isn't she nice?' As the kettle drum pushes the music over the edge, she flashes a look at the camera and they sweep out of the frame."

"We play it over and over-fanatic about getting it right. For now this is my favorite scene. This is my favorite child."

## NOTES

1. IN THE SHADOW OF THE STARS is distributed by First Run Features, New York.
2. Melodrama (from Greek *melos*, music + drama, the original opera) has implications of intensity, even exaggeration, often seen pejoratively, as a vulgar (i.e. popular) tendency, just as soap operas are often considered vulgar. Opera, music drama, lends itself to the intensity implied by melodrama. Even a drama such as Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, when translated to opera, becomes melodramatic.
3. STARS supports a long-standing U.S. tradition of doing honor to the ordinary person's extraordinary dreams. It is very well made by people with excellent track records. And yet it required heroic efforts to obtain funding to make this film. Eventually, funding was obtained from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), the National Endowment for the Arts (NEAX and private donors. As usual in independent film production in this country, a significant portion of the work and technical services were donated by friends; in the industry. Light and Saraf were not able to pay themselves for their own work, and they had to stop production several times to work at paying jobs in the industry, not just to support themselves but to contribute to the expenses of the film. In this way, their story as filmmakers closely reflects the situation of the auxiliary choristers in the film, people with talent and dedication, who love their art and work at other jobs so that they can also sing. (Most of the choristers in the San Francisco Opera now work there fulltime, a comparatively recent development.)
4. Allie Light directed SELF-HEALTH, which has strongly influenced feminist documentary work, and she has worked for many years as a filmmaker, writer, feminist activist, teacher, photographer; artist. Irving Saraf founded the film unit of KQED in San Francisco, managed the Saul Zaentz Film Company for ten years, and has collaborated as cameraman and as editor with a number of radical documentarians. He and Light taught film at San Francisco State and influenced

many younger filmmakers. Together they have made a series of documentaries on U.S. folk artists (VISIONS OF PARADISE), and a film about Asian American women poets (MITSUYE AND NELLIE). Both have been very supportive of other filmmakers' work in many different capacities. Thinking about the "missing" piece, which I identified as Mile's relationship with Chas, I realize that in fact it is also my relationship with Allie and Irving, not Light and Saraf the filmmakers, but Allie and Irving my friends, which is my own motivation for writing this review, and which I want to use to imbue the writing with a feeling something like the feeling I find in the film STARS. The trust in the filmmakers which allows the choristers to be so much themselves in front of the camera, the trust in our friendship which led the filmmakers to show me footage at so many different points in the filmmaking process, and to share theft worries, fears, troubles as well as their triumphs — this is an element which is traditionally ignored by critics for fear theft writing will be dismissed as biased. I hope instead, by making my personal bias clear, to open the way towards greater freedom of decision by the reader.

---

[To top](#)    [Current issue](#)    [Archived essays](#)    [Jump Cut home](#)

# Mothers, madness and melodrama

by Gretchen Bisplinghoff

from *Jump Cut*, no. 37, July 1992, pp. 120-126

copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1992, 2006

Our cultural concepts of madness are gender based. Practicing psychiatric workers as well as people in general share basic beliefs as to what constitutes abnormal behavior but their definition varies according to gender. Socialization differs between the sexes, which in turn shapes people's attitudes as to what is deviant. What operates is a double standard — a double bind. As Janet Stone notes,

"All of this is part of the dilemma system that women face every day. What is considered positive, admirable conduct in a man and in people in general is wrong and unnatural in a woman. To make matters worse, the standards by which people are believed, accepted, promoted and elected are the standards for men and for 'people.'"<sup>[1]</sup>[\[open notes in new window\]](#)

Research shows that the psychiatric work force considers male attributes the norm and female attributes deviant. Boys learn the proper attributes of the "masculine" role during socialization while little girls internalize "feminine" qualities, including passive docility. A study of standards held by psychiatric clinicians revealed that their definition of normal behavior follows the stereotypical patterns of sexual role-playing in which the male role operates as the normal healthy "person." The female role consists of incorporating abnormal traits in terms of mental health; thus woman is not in good mental health if she follows the traditional female role.<sup>[2]</sup> However, if the female attempts to adopt those "healthy" male traits — to become assertive, active, confident, etc. — her behavior then conflicts with her proper role and thus is also considered abnormal.

These psychiatric workers' background depends heavily on the pervasive impact of Sigmund Freud's work in the United States. Freud's main contribution to the treatment of mental illness lay in foregrounding sexuality as a basic element in personal development. His descriptions became prescriptions. In his descriptions of psychic life he unconsciously included explicit cultural interpretations about the proper behavioral attributes for women. Freud set up a diametrically opposed system, which focused on the boy's acquisition of patriarchal rights through the Oedipal struggle. He characterized the girl's development in terms of negation, defining that development in relation to the boy's power (his penis) and thus always describing the female by what she lacks. By couching this interpretation of childhood development in sexual, i.e., gender-determined, terms, he established

psychological diagnosis as biologically determinant. As recently as 1983, Baruch, Barnett and Rivers report that they are "distressed at how persistent the tendency is to link women's lives mainly to their biology, both in explanation of their lives and in prescriptions about how they should live."<sup>[3]</sup>

In my ongoing study of the madwoman in Hollywood melodrama from the 1940's through the 1980's, I have found a remarkable consistency in the presentation of female characters' illness. Freudian precepts have become widely diffused in popular culture. Here, based on a masculine health ethic, psychological diagnosis supports the working out of traditional role-playing. In cinema, this role-playing requires female characters to come to accept their proper position in life as determined by their sexual identity. My deviation from this role results in a diagnosis of abnormality. I found that films dealing with mentally ill women repeatedly focus on the illness' relation to female sexuality. In particular, the illness relates to the process of motherhood. In the following discussion, I'm going to look at the central importance of Freudian concepts of motherhood as these can be related to the image of female mental health in melodrama.

The films deal with this issue in terms of all phases of the motherhood process. First and foremost, the melodramas stress that the woman must choose to be a mother (avoiding diversions such as a career) in order to avoid mental illness. Then she must become pregnant and deliver a healthy, normal baby. Finally, she must devote herself to raising the child properly, taking special care that nothing happens to the child. At each stage of this scenario, incorporated Freudian theory sends disturbing, sometimes contradictory, messages about motherhood. The demands placed on a screen mother set up extremely narrow boundaries for her mental health. Although the message is that the female must adhere strictly to her role as mother, she often cannot avoid the pitfalls and loses her sanity.

Following this ideology, a woman's ability to bear children dictates that she must have children in order to fulfill her "normal" destiny. A woman's "natural," correct role follows function. She can reproduce. Therefore, she should. She should focus her energies toward this "ultimate" proof and embodiment of her womanhood. The mother in Freudian, patriarchal ideology sacrifices her self, her individuality, to nurture others. She must display "maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than the creation of self."<sup>[4]</sup> The central elements of her femininity are defined as "constitutional passivity, masochism, and narcissism."<sup>[5]</sup> Reacting against these predetermined elements of motherhood is seemingly abnormal for the female psyche.

Furthermore, according to this kind of psychology, the "normal" functioning of a woman's brain depends upon the condition of the uterus. Any bodily change of a sexual nature, such as pregnancy, destabilizes the mind. The normal female bodily cycle is seen as dysfunctional. A woman's mind remains continually at risk throughout her life as it depends for its well-being on the dictates of a "diseased" system. Thus, the psychological disorders of women even appear within "proper" social manifestations of sexual roles. As Ann Jones documents:

"In any case, whenever there was frustration of 'all those instinctive yearnings for...husband and children; all the outgoing of longing for all that is implied in home, the care of it, and all connected with it,' there the gynecologist (another new scientist) was bound to find a 'nervous, capricious, irritable, and hysterical' woman

suffering from uterine derangement of one kind or another.' Women who tried to study or to follow a profession diverted blood to their brains in the mental hyperactivity that characterized the insane; menstruation ceased and disease resulted. And any woman who tried to avoid motherhood, woman's 'supremest function,' was sure to end in disease."<sup>[6]</sup>

Hollywood films adapted Freudian precepts to approach the subject of mental illness. Popular culture's Freudianism represents a simplified version of psychoanalysis, but one which reproduces many of Freud's major positions, including much of the misogyny.<sup>[7]</sup> Particularly in relationship to motherhood, as E. Ann Kaplan points out,

"film is perhaps more guilty than other art forms of literalizing and reducing Freudian motherhood theory."<sup>[8]</sup>

Interpretation of dreams, the psychiatric couch, reliving and exorcising the childhood trauma, etc., became central representations of the psychiatric world in early melodramas<sup>[9]</sup> such as SNAKE PIT, SPELLBOUND, and THREE FACES OF EVE. This depiction continues in such mainstream representations as MARNIE, I'M DANCING AS FAST AS I CAN, FRANCES, and FATAL ATTRACTION. (The madness of Alex Forest directly relates to her sexual identity — her aggressive sexuality results in unwanted pregnancy.) Even when there appears to be surface changes (the female psychiatrist in I NEVER PROMISED YOU A ROSE GARDEN no longer makes overt Freudian pronouncements about her patient's condition), the underlying message concerning the main character's gender-based mental identity has not altered.

In their discussion of the madwomen films of the 40s through 60s, Marsha Kinder and Beverle Houston point out that

"madness is frequently linked to motherhood, the experience which supposedly makes or breaks a woman."<sup>[10]</sup>

After the birth of her child in TENDER IS THE NIGHT, Nicole says,

"It shows I'm normal, doesn't it?"

Often when particular reasons for the female's madness are not specifically given, as in IMAGES, characters allude to "deficiencies" in the area of motherhood. These include "past regretted abortion, sorrow over the inability to have children."<sup>[11]</sup> Films exploring the theme of possible hereditary insanity often focus on the woman who rejects a "normal" life of having children within marriage because of the possible consequences to her future offspring. Unfortunately, this loss also strikes her mind. In KING'S ROW, she sacrifices herself for her future children's sake.

However, as previously mentioned, the Freudian definition of motherhood demands self-negation. Thus, women's self-sacrifice appears as the norm in Hollywood melodrama. Also, these films ennable the mother's personal sacrifices. In the name of motherly love she gives up her own needs, such as a career. In the name of motherhood she will even give up her child "for its own good." Stella Dallas, who stands in the rain outside the house in which her beloved daughter is marrying the "right" man, embodies this quintessential mother. Her face pressed

up against a fence, she watches until a policeman comes to move along the lower class element. She chooses to give her child a better life by giving the daughter up, a mother's ultimate sacrifice (still a current message, given Beat Midler's remake of *STELLA DALLAS*). Within the context of film mothers' "normal" extreme sacrifice, to define excess as leading to madness seems contradictory. How much self-sacrifice is too much within the mother role? This problem of balance recurs again and again.

The first stage of the process, pregnancy, is presented in film as a "delicate" time, which subjects women's minds to the uncontrollable influence of bodily changes. Symptoms of emotional instability, often consisting of unexpected weakness and wide mood swings, indicate the "normal illness" of film pregnancy. The female in a "delicate condition" constitutes a familiar figure in films. Often the first indication by which a husband learns of his wife's coming "blessed event" is an otherwise healthy woman's unexpected fainting spell. Another common signal appears in a normally placid, content wife's sudden, strangely emotional outburst. Susannah's pregnancy in *RAINTREE COUNTY* is portrayed as the catalyst that triggers her mental collapse. Pregnancy brings on her nightmares and paranoid attacks on her husband. She begins condemning her own worthlessness in hysterical outbursts:

"Then you punish me, Johnny. Go on, beat me, hurt me! You're too good for me, Johnny."

Films thoroughly document the consequences of infertility for a female character. Pressures on a woman to fulfill her natural duty can result in "hysterical" pregnancy, an exclusively female symptom of otherwise hidden mental disease. In *FREUD*, a lecturing psychoanalyst points out,

"*Hysteria* comes from the Greek word for *womb*. To this day doctors believe it exists only in women, if they admit it exists at all."

In this film, in his practice Freud confronts a case of hysterical paralysis and blindness. He later feels he has completely cured the patient by the use of hypnosis, which caused the woman to relive part of her childhood trauma. He reports to his colleague that Cecily is cured; she moves "as freely and gracefully as a young deer." She manifests the first sign of deeper, more profound psychic disturbance in her enactment of a hysterical pregnancy and childbirth scene. She first appears knitting "booties"; she later goes into "labor." However, according to Freud, "she isn't pregnant, nor could she be." He later interprets these actions as representative of her relationship with the two male authority figures of her father and Freud — those men that she unconsciously wishes to have children with.

The need for children causes Myra Savage in *SEANCE ON A WET AFTERNOON* to deny the loss of her stillborn son. She gradually loses touch with reality by keeping him alive in her mind. She has a "gift" which keeps her in touch with him. She reports that "his" wishes propel her actions. She tells her husband Billy, who tries to help her live with the loss, that Arthur wants recognition for her as one who possesses a "true" gift. In order for the world to recognize her professional abilities as a legitimate medium, she and Billy (with Arthur's guidance) devise an elaborate kidnapping scheme. She calls it "our beautiful, perfect plan... Remember when we conceived it?" She refers to their activity as a "little lie," a means to an end, as just "borrowing" a child. Throughout she refers to Arthur's closeness, his continuing

presence, his maturing through the years: "Remember what Arthur was like at that age..." Though Billy reluctantly goes along with the actual execution of her plan because of her desperation, he tries to make her face the reality of Arthur's death and their criminal actions.

However, her mind refuses to accept the finality of her loss; it has been too great a blow. Billy finally leaves the little girl where the police will find her. The police then arrive to question the couple. They ask for Myra's help in uncovering more "information" on the case. As she enters her trance, the world in which she is a mother, she slips completely back to the moment of her "failure." She sits lamenting: "They won't let me see him. All that waiting, all that time and nothing to hold." Then gradually she calms, making a small shape of a cloth, wrapping it in the end of her shawl and gently rocking it in her arms. Creating the image of the baby she never held, she whispers, "Wait for me precious, hush, hush..." In that crucial moment of destroyed promise and fulfillment that determines the present, Myra loses a son, and consequently her mental balance, apparently forever.

The inability to produce "normal" children also ends in tragedy for the mind of Marina Greg, a former actress, in *THE MIRROR CRACK'D*. She suffers two mental breakdowns as the result of a "disastrous" childbirth. When she finds that she can't have children, she and her husband adopt two. These, however, are not her "natural" children; thus, they never appear in the film. When she gives birth to a deformed, retarded child (an "idiot" according to her husband), she suffers a menial breakdown.

At the film's opening she is attempting a comeback, apparently after the passage of some years. At the festive gathering at the location where her new film is to be shot, she is introducing her company to each other and to the locals when her mind suffers its second shock. She stops and stares fixedly at Bellini's depiction of Mother and Child, a cultural icon embodying the idealized mother-child relationship. As she gazes, a fan reveals that she had unknowingly caused the tragic birth; she was such a loyal fan that years before she left her sickbed (with German measles) to meet the actress. Marina's memory of the birth, followed by the revelation of the stupid, senseless, act that caused its tragic outcome, prove too much for her mind to bear. Her suicide soon follows. The mirror that cracks represents the image of a woman whose mental well-being depends on the birth of a child.

In the narrative line, Marina's mental collapses first destroy her original career and then any possibility of a comeback. The film focuses on her failed role as mother, with its resulting consequences for her mind. Her career becomes invisible as work just when she is just starting to prepare for the future project. Pregnancy and a career cannot co-exist. Marina's "disastrous" maternity, which ends in madness, results directly from her career involvement with the public. Her availability as a public figure exposes her to assault. By pursuing a career, she loses everything. Thus those who choose a career, who choose to postpone, or not have children, court madness.

Buddy in *THE BELL JAR* wants to give Esther "a nice life" with "lots of kids":

Esther: "I like kids, yes, but I thought I might be a writer."

Buddy: "You can write, you can write when the kids are in bed. I'll even

help you wash the dishes. That's a promise."

Esther decides to pursue her dream. In college, she wins a poetry award, then goes to New York on a scholarship to lend "intellectual elevation" to a woman's magazine. At the magazine, however, the editors humiliate her for her aspirations. They coerce her into producing reports and fiction for mass consumption. For the remainder of the film she fights insanity, while expressing the belief that she is "going" to be a poet someday. As in *THE MIRROR CRACK'D*, Esther's work on her career as a poet doesn't exist in the film itself (except for a very few lines of voice over). She asserts that, unlike other women who are the place the arrow (man) shoots from, she is "going to be the arrow." But in the closing line of the film, she acknowledges the failure of her choice: "If I am the arrow, I cannot fly through darkness."

Also the central element of Norma Desmond's madness in *SUNSET BOULEVARD* is her fixation on her career to the exclusion of a family. As Joe Gillis, the voice-over narrator of the film, points out: "She's crazy when it came to that subject [of her career]." Her ambition excludes the "normal" role of devotion to family life with one man. This self-absorption results eventually in total insanity. Her three marriages all failed; a dead chimpanzee represents her only "child." A central, haunting image of the film, the burial of the dead chimp — "seems to summarize the sterile state of a world which floats adrift from the normalcy of a society normally governed by the institution of marriage, and the relations of family life."<sup>[12]</sup> The film stresses the emptiness of Norma's life without those relationships that give a woman's life stability. When Joe removes the last vestige of her hope for a comeback by cruelly revealing the truth about other people's expressions of interest in her career, her mind disintegrates into mad delusions. Such a career/childbearing dichotomy which results in madness continues in more recent portrayals of seemingly "liberated" couples.<sup>[13]</sup>

However, also at risk with those women who suffer mental breakdowns because they do not produce progeny are those who lose their minds because they don't do anything else. They indulge in the process to excess. The mother's overproductive sexual organs, her "uncontrolled fertility"<sup>14</sup> also pose a "horror" to a woman's mind. Because these women have no lives outside of family relationships, their only actively "creative" outlet appears to be childbearing: "All (they) want to do is sit in a corner and give birth" (*PUMPKIN EATER*).

Although Mrs. Armitage's six children in *PUMPKIN EATER* threaten her relationship with her present husband Jake (he's "tired of living in a nursery"), she becomes pregnant again. He "slaves his guts out" for this "army of kids." In this process he becomes a successful screenwriter. She "slaves" at home-cooking, sewing and caring for the children. However, she is "getting worse all the time." She finally breaks down while shopping in Harrods, so Jake arranges for a "good" psychiatrist for her before going on location. As Jake prepares to leave at this very difficult time, he finally says that he has to go because, "It's my life." She replies "Where's mine?" The mental stress of constant childbearing proves too great. However, motherhood itself is still validated, because she returns to her role in the family at the film's end after submitting to abortion, sterilization and psychotherapy.

After the birth of a child, films focus on the mother-child bond and stress the

necessity for the woman to be completely absorbed in rearing her child. However, dangers are also clear for such an immersion, especially for an "amateur" working from instinct and intuition. Presentations of mothers who regress totally into the mother-child relationship illustrate the very fine line between (and contradictory messages about) the commitment presumably required to raise normal, healthy children, and absorption that is depicted as dangerous. The woman who devotes herself to this interaction can be defined as abnormal if she relies upon her children for self-definition (as in *PUMPKIN EATER*, *WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE*, *RAINTREE COUNTY* and others). This seeming paradox directly reflects the psychoanalytic view, which exalts childbirth as the final proof of feminine maturity. However, it also establishes the foundation of mother love in regression: lack of identity. Only the mother's erasure of her mature self can establish the mother-child bond-she regresses to a naturally intuitive, childlike state herself.

"The explanation for this paradox, according to the psychoanalysts, was that only through regression could a woman overcome her girlhood penis envy. The regression allowed her to unconsciously accept the baby as the symbolic 'gift' of a penis, compensating her for her own long-resented 'castration.' Conciliated at last, the woman is able to accept her femininity and submit without envy to her husband's love."<sup>[15]</sup>

The woman thus is encouraged to exist on the same level of dependency as her children. According to the psychoanalysts she can be expected to regress to "a psychological replay of her own infancy by the experience of motherhood,"<sup>[16]</sup> and will thus respond readily as the obedient child to the authority figures in her life.

The repeated use of a doll as part of the visual imagery of the madwoman codes her within her role as mother at her most regressive. The repeated choice of the doll image (*SNAKE PIT*; *RAINTREE COUNTY*; *FREUD*; *WHATEVER HAPPENED TO BABY JANE?*; *SUDDENLY, LAST SUMMER*; *SISTERS*; *A SAFE PLACE*; *FRANCES*; etc.) automatically operates to place the woman within the female role at her most regressive-in both childhood and motherhood. The representation of Susannah's illness in *RAINTREE COUNTY* directly relates to her collection of dolls. The most pivotal to her mental health is a partially burned doll directly linked to her childhood trauma. In the stresses of pregnancy, she immediately begins to sleepwalk, searching for her lost doll. After the birth of her son she continues to regress to the time of her childhood trauma. She begins reacting with paranoia to everyday occurrences. She finally tells her son that she's going "to do something for Daddy." Gathering up her doll, she takes it with her into the swamps, where her drowned body is found the next day. Her regression leads finally back to complete erasure of self.

Mabel in *WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE* has only one refuge from the chaos of her life-her children. She and Nick battle constantly over standards of behavior in their home. However, his orders have the societal weight of his position as head of the family. He uses physical force to enforce them. She resists primarily through identifying with her children. "She finds herself in them, even saying 'the only thing I've ever done in my whole life is make you guys.'"<sup>[17]</sup> She begins adopting their "childlike" spontaneity in social interactions. She finally defines herself through them within their play.

At one point in WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE Mabel allows young children, including her own, to run around without clothing in the spontaneity of play at a party. The film's authority figures interpret her identification with the children as concrete evidence of Mabel's insanity. Unlike Nick's outbursts, "Mabel's eccentric behavior is defined as crazy and she is punished accordingly."<sup>[18]</sup> Nick represents the male-dominated authority figures who determine the boundaries of sanity within the power structure of the patriarchal culture.

This relationship with her child defines the mother figure. Thus, she must constantly guard that nothing happens to the child. The greatest blow to her identity is loss of a child. The direct cause of the breakdown which leads to the institutionalization of the main character in THE CARETAKERS, Lorna Melford, is the death of her child. In THREE FACES OF EVE, four months after Eve lost a baby, her husband takes her to see a psychiatrist for headaches and "spells" of amnesia, mental problems of maternal guilt and instability apparently triggered by the loss. Obviously, any direct attempt by a mother to harm her own child offers the most immediate, decisive proof of insanity. In THE THREE FACES OF EVE, the problems of the "sweet, rather baffled young housewife" Eve White, are perplexing to the psychiatrist, but he does not suspect serious illness until she attacks her child Bonnie.

After several weeks of therapy, Eve White had seemed better, had fewer headaches and "no spells that she knew of" (according to Alistair Cooke, who introduced this "classic" case). However, the "alarm" about the true nature of her condition sounds a year later. Her husband confronts her with bills for purchases of which she has no memory, threatens to slap her face for "lying," and leaves the room to pack the clothing items for return. Bonnie's scream brings him running back to the living room, where he throws Eve to the floor to stop her from strangling the child. After he checks Bonnie, he stands over his wife, telling her to stay down on the floor: "I'll kill you, you get up." She slowly turns her face to the floor, lowering herself back down onto her arms. The scene then fades into an immediate consultation with the psychiatrist. Here Eve Black, the true perpetrator of the violence, first appears.

"Psychoanalytic theory identified two broad categories of bad mothers — the rejecting mother and the overprotective mother, mirror images and equally malevolent" — in terms of their effect on both mother and child.<sup>[19]</sup> These categories and effects appear onscreen. In THE THREE FACES OF EVE, the housewife's two opposing personalities literally embody a dichotomy of female sexuality within one character. They also represent the poles of abusive and over-involved motherhood. The "trouble-making" Eve Black is visually coded within her sexually aggressive role (as is Norma Desmond in SUNSET BOULEVARD and Alex Forest in FATAL ATTRACTION).

Julia Lesage, in her article, "S/Z and RULES OF THE GAME," describes how culturally coded elements and details of a character's existence tend to go unnoticed as part of the "realistic" film portrayal of a character. However, they delineate the boundaries of our understanding of this character's behavior. As she points out:

"In film as in theater, directors carefully control costuming so as to present a certain kind of person appropriate for a certain role. Both film and theater depend on fashion stereotypes or the semic code of dress."

Eve Black's stereotype of the "loose" woman (and the common stereotype of the "nymphomaniac" madwoman) is explicitly coded. The presentation of various states of revealing dress are culturally interpreted as mirroring a woman's sexual attitudes. These form the basic elements for defining her mental stability.

Eve Black's low-cut red dress (she wants the doctor to have her red dress when she dies because he's the only one who knows what it meant to her) functions in direct contrast to Eve White's plain, fully covering shirtwaists, blouses and skirts. Of course, standards, including industry censorship, concerning dress have changed a great deal since 1957. However, films such as DARK MIRROR, IMAGES, SISTERS or THREE FACES OF EVE use direct opposition of character portrayals to guide interpretation of the madwoman's appearance and behavior. In addition, authority figures' response to the character throughout the films shape this interpretation. Eve Black's behavior toward Bonnie first indicates the seriousness of her mental condition. Then during one visit to the doctor she puts one foot on the edge of his desk, tilting her chair back as she literally lets her hair down. She invites him to forget his wife for one night to go dancing with her. She then proceeds to turn on the radio to demonstrate various seductive maneuvers with her hips designed to entice him into "sneaking out" a back door with her. This self-indulgent, overtly sexual behavior immediately results in institutionalization.

However, neither of these personalities are deemed qualified by the authority figures to continue in the role of mother. Eve White loves her child ("I'd die before I'd hurt Bonnie") to the exclusion of her own needs. She makes key decisions about her life based solely upon their effects on Bonnie. She refuses to return home during treatment for fear of harming Bonnie. Her husband then leaves her. She says she's not "fit for anything"; her death will be better for Bonnie. The doctor diagnoses Eve White as a "dreary little woman," who is such a "defeated" personality that she's not "qualified" to fill the role of mother. Eve Black is not "fit" either; she's a "rollicking and irresponsible playgirl." She openly flaunts her sexuality without regard to procreation. She refuses to acknowledge her family responsibilities. She denies that Ralph is her husband. More importantly, she rejects Bonnie as her daughter ("not while I'm in my right mind she's not"). Eve can only be cured and reunited with her daughter when both of these personalities die and the third, "pleasant young" Jane, finds the "right" man to marry. The mentally ill, screen mother's condition threatens her children. The responsibility for "failures" in children's lives falls primarily at the feet of the mother. When the bad mother neglects her child, both the neglected child, particularly the vulnerable female, and the mother may fall prey to madness. Kinder and Houston point out,

"When the madwoman is a killer, her evil nature is clearly associated with her sex. It is...traced to the mother-child relationship (as in THE BAD SEED, STRAIGHT JACKET, and WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH HELEN); where the mother is responsible for tainting or destroying her perverted child ..."[21]

In BERSERK, the daughter of Monica Rivers, owner of a traveling circus, becomes a maniac killer because her mother continually neglected her daughter for circus work, her career. Thus, women who try to pursue a career while raising a child endanger their children. In films such as SNAKE PIT, FREUD and MARNIE, the neglectful mother (because of career, remarriage, other pregnancies, illness, etc.)

routinely appears as one of the things responsible for the madwoman's condition.

However, again, madness associated with the image of the neglectful mother is equaled by the havoc wrought by the overly-involved mother (SUDDENLY, LAST SUMMER; WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE; NOW VOYAGER). This character immerses herself so deeply in the mother-child relationship as to exclude social reality, defining herself entirely within that regressive relationship. Surrounded by her Venus flytraps, "a devouring organism aptly named for the goddess of love," Violet Venable in SUDDENLY, LAST SUMMER is obsessed with preserving the "perfect" memory of her son's life. Violet and her son were inseparable. She recalls that they were a "famous couple"; she was "the only one who could satisfy him." She refuses to accept the truth of her son's sexual orientation and appetites.

In order to erase the truth forever, she must silence her niece, Kathryn, whose destiny she controls as if Kathryn were her child. Kathryn witnessed Sebastian's death and the trauma caused temporary amnesia. Mrs. Venable has had her institutionalized in an asylum since that terrible day. She is now preparing to bribe the hospital personnel and Kathryn's family into authorizing a lobotomy. Her plan ultimately fails when the doctor takes an interest in Kathryn's case. Through hypnosis Kathryn recalls the way in which Sebastian used her as beautiful "bait" to lure the boys he coveted, as he had used the young Violet. However, this ended with his death at their hands.

These revelations become more than Violet's mind can stand. The mother who attempted to be all things to her son becomes mad as his former wife becomes cured. The mother mentally joins the son again, to the exclusion of the rest of the world. Violet addresses the doctor as Sebastian: "Oh, we are lucky, Sebastian, to need no one else. We have one another-just the two of us."

Medical and legal authorities have long pointed out how difficult it is to define insanity. However, descriptions of the parameters of mental health on the basis of gender pervade the culture. One source lies in Hollywood melodrama from the 40s to the 80s, which stresses the central importance of motherhood (an increasingly stressful role in today's society) while simultaneously establishing that within its contradictions lies madness.

## NOTES

1. Janet Stone and Jane Bochner, *Speaking Up* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), p. 4.
2. Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness* (New York: Avon, 1972). pp. 68-69.
3. Grace Burch, Rosiland Barnett and Caryl Rivers, "Happiness is a Good Job," *Working Woman* 8, No. 2 (February, 1983), 76.
4. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: Bantam, 1977), p. 24.
5. Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Avon, 1969), p.262.
6. Ann Jones, *Women Who Kill* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980), p. 161.

7. Monique Plaza, 'The Mother/ The Same: Hatred of the Mother in Psychoanalysis," *Feminist Issues* 2, No. 1 (Spring, 1982), 75-99.

8. E. Ann Kaplan, "Motherhood and Representation: From Post World War II Freudian Figurations to Postmodernism," *The Minnesota Review* 29 (1987), 88.

9. Images of psychiatrists in film are discussed in Krin and Glen Gabbard, *Psychiatry and the Cinema* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 1987).

10. Marsha Kinder and Beverle Houston, "Madwomen in the Movies: Women Under the Influence," *Film Heritage* 11, No. 2 (Winter, 1976), 2.

11. Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus* (New York: Avon, 1973). p. 359.

12. Sylvia Harvey, "Women's Place: The Absent Family of Film Noir," in *Women in Film Noir*, ed E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1978), p. 33.

13. Kinder and Houston, pp. 10-11.

14. Barbara Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection." *Screen* 27, No. 1 (January- February, 1986), 44'

15. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English, *For Her Own Good* (New York: Doubleday, 1978), p. 201.

16. Ehrenreich and English, p. 202.

17. Michele Russell, WOMAN UNDER THE INFLUENCE," *Cineaste* 7, No. 1(1975). 35.

18. Kinder and Houston, p. 12.

19. Ehrenreich and English, p. 205.

20. Julia Lesage, "S/Z and RULES OF THE GAME." *Jump Cut*, No. 12/13 (December 30, 1976), p.48.

21. Kinder and Houston, p.3.